

LOG

HORIZON


異世界の始まり

橙乃ままれ

著 ハラカズヒロ 画



ログ・ホライズン



アキバとススキノの間を渡りきった人間は、
この異世界ではまだいない。
——この景色を見るのは、僕たちが初めてなんだ。



LOG HORIZON

Fragrant green winds blow across this new, yet somehow old land. The imaginary world of Theldesia is home to dragons and giants, monsters and demihumans. With a burden weighing upon your soul, go forth, O winged one. <Adventures> This land spreads out before you like a blank page; make your mark in it!

ロ グ ・ ホ ラ イ ズ ン

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橙乃ままれ

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エルダーテイル

【エルダーテイル】

その自重を支える

魂の翼持つへ冒険者へよ、

竜と巨人が、

魔獣と亜人が住まう、

幻想の世界セルデシア。

緑の風が薫る、

ここは新しく、また旧い大地。

開かれた白いページのような

この大地に

己の生を刻み込め。

Prologue

"Naotsugu, pay attention to the right!"

"Right, leave it to me!"

Naotsugu replied to Shiroe's warning with a yell, raised his silver shield and downed the Triffid.

"My lord!"

With one blow, Akatsuki quickly restrained the green twisted ivy reaching out from the left, and right after that, she lowered her body and positioned herself to protect Shiroe.

This place was the Herbery of Small Stone.

It was a small zone but as it held ancient entertainment facilities, it was different from the ruins around it. There were great variations in its terrain and combat was difficult.

"Then again, isn't this a little too many?"

"Their numbers increase whenever Naotsugu cracks a dirty joke."

"So it's my fault?"

Without replying to Naotsugu's retort, Shiroe cast a bluish-white magic arrow and fired it at the Briar Weasels. Mind Bolt was a basic attack magic of Enchanters, an arrow of mental energy that struck a single enemy.

While Shiroe was looking at the rodent-like creature that was roughly a meter in height as it shrieked and jumped about, an icon appeared in his mind.

The icon had turned pale to represent its recast time, and it was slowly recovering like an hourglass. Until the icon regained its luster, that spell was unusable. However, there were close to 30 other skills that Shiroe could use.

"Rush them! Akatsuki, attack their left flank!"

"Roger that!"

"Leave it to me!"

Furthermore, even if all of his skills were unusable, Shiroe currently had two comrades with him.

"Haa, let's do it! Shield Smash!"

The silver-armored warrior who quickly advanced down the moss-covered path and swept his shield

sideways, mowing enemies down, was Naotsugu. He was a tall guy with short hair and jovial-looking eyes and he was Shiroe's friend from the old days.

His class was Guardian. Among the 3 warrior classes that could single-handedly draw in and tank enemies' assaults, Guardians boasted the greatest defensive abilities and, in Elder Tales, were nicknamed "Unbreakable Shield".

"... Too slow!"

A young girl, who gave one the impression of a swallow, made a quick dash into the gap that appeared from Naotsugu's assault. A strange creature that looked like a burst rugby ball with glass-like fangs growing from it attacked but she cut it down with the short sword she wielded as she passed it.

This petite girl with her black hair fluttering in the wind was Akatsuki.

She called Shiroe "My lord" without hesitation and was also Shiroe's friend.

Her class was Assassin. It was a resourceful class that wielded one-hit kill skills. It boasted of having the strongest physical attack among the 12 classes of Elder Tales.

Though Shiroe viewed the movements of these two in fascination, he hurriedly advanced forward.

Shiroe's class was Enchanter.

Amongst the three magic attack classes, it was a 100% support class type specializing in support and battle status magic. As was common for magic attack classes, the Enchanter's defense wasn't something to rely on. Leaving out Naotsugu's full-plated armor, it couldn't even equip the leather armor of Adventurers like the set Akatsuki was wearing.

Under the huge white gown-looking mantle of his, there was nothing more than a rather ordinary tunic shirt and a pair of trousers.

Shiroe, who was the rear support without defensive abilities, could not be left alone on the battlefield; he needed to take the opponent's area-of-effect magic into account while keeping in mind that being overly close to the front lines could be dangerous. So the best method was to be wary of ambushes of the rear while maintaining a set distance from Naotsugu and Akatsuki.

Needless to say, the Herbery of Small Stone was not a field-zone of a high difficulty.

The monsters that could appear in this zone were Triffids, Briar Weasels, and Venom Moths; all around Level 50.

Shiroe and the other two were Level 90 Adventurers.

In the world of the MMORPG, Elder Tales, they were the highest class of power. Even if Shiroe's defense was low, he wouldn't receive much damage with that much of a level gap.

Furthermore, although Naotsugu was up against a large number of opponents, even if it were just ten or

twenty Triffids, they were opponents of a level where they could be taken care of single-handedly by any of the three party members.

(Even so, the current situation...)

Till now, the three of them all had carefree looks on their faces, chatting and bickering, but Naotsugu and Akatsuki both had serious expressions right now.

Battles were terrifying.

Even if one had a strong body or a sound mind, even if one cast magic or used a sword skill, when facing a monster, fear still lingered.

Both feet on the ground, hands firmly gripping his staff, they were all parts of his body. The wind that blew past his cheeks, the piercing howls of the monsters, the adrenaline that was pumping through his blood, they were all that Shiroe was experiencing at the present.

Tooth and claw that suddenly appeared in their faces, flames or attacks of acid assaulted them. Needing to dodge or intercept these attacks at the frontlines was a lot harder than they thought. In order to conquer this handicap, they had no choice but to accumulate combat experience, this was the conclusion the three of them had come up with.

"Watch your right!"

"I got it!"

Despite a serious look on his face, Naotsugu still swiftly looked in the direction that Shiroe had warned him from, swinging the longsword in his right hand. Although the strike did not deal a critical hit, it was sufficient to restrict the movements of the Briar Weasel.

The weasel extended its green briar, glaring with its crimson eyes as it chirped two or three times, pulling back by curling its body into a ball.

The attack just now had proven their suspicions.

They were all Level 90 Adventurers, originally if they met these monsters that were around Level 48, it would be impossible for a situation where there would be an "Attack Failure".

This proved that the cooperation between the two was still insufficient.

Despite being Level 90 Adventurers, they were still unable to wield their skills to the best of their best abilities yet.

"Nightmare Sphere!"

That was why they had to carry out their roles the best they could. Shiroe who had arrived at this conclusion executed an area of effect skill. Nightmare Sphere was an area of effect attack magic that Enchanters possessed.

Although it was an offensive skill, the damage that it actually dealt was very little.

The Enchanter class was not versed in offensive magic from the start. Compared to other classes of the same level, the attack magic that Enchanters could dish out by themselves was very weak; this was a fact known to everyone. The skill that Shiroe used traced out an unreliable arc, landing right in the middle of the weasels and the moving plants and violently exploded; it seemed that it did not cause much damage to the opponents, this was the best proof that Enchanters were weak.

Even though they were monsters who had levels half of his, he was still unable to defeat them in one strike; only able to use attacks of such low damage, this was the trait possessed by Enchanters.

As such, the Enchanter was an unpopular class in Elder Tales.

As players, they were ruthless when playing games. In a world where language and communication was restricted, numbers were something that was absolute. Despite being in a game universe and precisely because it was a game universe, it caused this world to be a caste society that was even more heartless and strict than the real world.

The classes that were "highly popular" and the outcast classes had a very large evaluation gap.

However, even though it wasn't popular with normal players, Shiroe was not unhappy with his own class. It would be great if he had some special ability that he could use, but despite lacking in that, he was still able to find a way to enjoy playing this class. This was Shiroe's playing style and the truth of it was, Shiroe never once felt troubled when he played this class.

Furthermore, Shiroe liked the Enchanter class.

Including this troublesome trait, its weak abilities as well as its hidden versatility, Shiroe was interested in all of them. The class that was "useless if he was left alone," it was completely different from Shiroe's own shortcomings, Shiroe liked that particular point very much.

The Nightmare Sphere that Shiroe cast released a colorless mental wave in its area of effect. The multiple enemies caught in its area were all affected by the wave, they seemed to have suffered grave mental trauma, resulting in a huge drop in movement speed.

It was the status ailment of movement speed reduction.

Nightmare Sphere was a skill that had short effect duration but it was capable of inflicting a crippling effect on its target.

"Yeah! I can fight better like this!"

"Thank you, my lord."

The two cried out with elated voices. The monsters that the three were currently embroiled with were Triffids and Briar Weasels, although they looked menacing and hideous, the height of the two monsters were only around a meter.

Once their movement speed dropped, they would only need to step in boldly, and let their attacks hit.

"Alright! I got one!"

"Same here!"

"Not bad, Shrimp!"

"Don't call me a shrimp, Idiot Naotsugu!"

The two teammates weren't people who would only engage in negative thinking.

Naotsugu's positive thinking was exceptional and although Akatsuki was usually silent, she was not behind Naotsugu in that field of thinking as well.

As long as an opportunity was provided and ample support was given, they would be able to repeatedly defeat monsters. Shiroe only needed to provide rear support for the two, if the two had monsters left over that they had missed, he would only need to use magic to restrain them as well as provide a final blow.

Lowering the movement speed of the opponent was something that would turn the tables to one's advantage. Since that point was understood, Shiroe would know what he should do, that would mean using Nightmare Sphere or Astral Bind related restraining type magics to restrict the enemies, completely taking on the role of supporting the front lines.

Thinking closely, it was not that big of a deal at all, it was a basic battle strategy that had been repeated countless times.

(At the very least, we can't continue struggling with these low-level opponents; I still haven't tested a new formation yet.)

Shiroe pondered over such thoughts.

"Take that!"

"Haa!"

A sharp yell sounded out. Naotsugu and Akatsuki were seasoned players with tons of experience.

As long as there was an opportunity, they would become partners that focused on teamwork who got along remarkably well. His preconceived doubts vanished.

"It's over like that?"

Naotsugu swung his one-handed sword in a large arc, wiping the blood off his sword before returning it to its sheath.

Coming back to his senses, the battle was already over.

Shiroe nodded his head in reply in response to Naotsugu's question, dispelling the magic that he had been

readying.

"We defeated a lot of monsters already."

"There seems to be no more indications of any enemies in the surroundings, maybe it'd be best to stay alert for a while--I'm sorry, but can you two help with the loot?"

Shiroe called out while beginning to observe the surroundings.

The warning indication in his mind changed from red to a calming blue, indicating that battle mode had been deactivated.

Naotsugu and Akatsuki started to loot the monsters that they had felled, they probably were going to strip the weasels of their fur.

This was survival instinct that had been honed from the past few weeks.

It was fortunate that the sun was still high in the sky.

There shouldn't be any abrupt incidents that might happen. Shiroe withdrew a water bottle from his magic bag at his hip and took a sip, pricking his ears for any sign of trouble.

(Really now, in the end the one that keeps thinking negative thoughts is me.)

Shiroe let out a long sigh.

Looking down, it was the edge of his white cloak, made from tough cloth that was suitable for outdoor activities, long pants that seemed to be of high quality. If he remembered correctly, the shoes that he was currently wearing were made from Thunder Elk's leather, boots that were soft and comfortable.

As for what he was carrying, it was a staff.

Staff of the Wise Owl--it was a rare item that was able to raise his magical power and casting speed, it was Shiroe's treasure.

Around two meters long, it was longer than Shiroe's height.

His appearance gave him a sort of mysterious air. Shiroe thought that such a design looked great, the word "great" was not the feeling that he'd use in the real world, but the feeling that one would feel inside the virtual world.

After that day when the incident coined as the Catastrophe happened, everything around Shiroe and the others had totally changed.

It wasn't as grandiose nor as sweet as heroic epics, but full of sarcasm, muddled, stress-laden and tough--another "Reality".

The "Reality" mentioned, were the monsters that Shiroe and his friends had just fought against; it was the reason why Shiroe was paying attention to any movement around him, it was the ruins that was shrouded in greenery, it was the teammates who wielded their weapons and skinned their prey.

A cold wind blew through the forest, bringing a chill with it.

As well as leaving behind the fear of battle under his skin.

All of this, was currently the "Reality" that Shiroe was living in.

Shiroe and his friends seemed to have been confined in the world that was supposed to be just a game, Elder Tales. After the Catastrophe happened, everything changed.

(However, if we can do battle like this we can earn money as long as we fight. We have a bed waiting for us when we go back. Furthermore, since I can meet Naotsugu and Akatsuki because of this in many different levels, this can said to be the most fortunate turn of events.)

Shiroe repeatedly sighed, forcibly changing his gloomy thinking into something more positive.

The scene of the day when the Catastrophe happened flashed in his head, the scene of countless players holing up in Akiba. Shiroe did not wish to be like them as they fell into a swamp of despair.

Shiroe observed his surroundings as he recounted the chain of events that happened on the day the Catastrophe occurred.

CHAPTER.



‘CATASTROPHE’

〈 大 災 害 〉

▶ NAME: SHIROE

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: HALF-ALV

▶ CLASS: ENCHANTER

▶ HP: 8303

▶ MP: 12808

▶ ITEM 1:

[PRUDENT HORNEO OWL CANE]

A CANE CONTAINING THE HOLY PROTECTION OF THE HORNEO OWL, MESSENGER OF THE GOD OF WISDOM. IT IS SAID THAT IT AIDS THE POSSESSORS THOUGHTS WITH ITS WISDOM, LIGHTING A PATH THROUGH UNCERTAINTY. ITS MAGICAL POWER IS CASTING SPEED INCREASE.



▶ ITEM 2:

[CELESTIAL SPIRIT CLOAK]

CLOAK USED EXCLUSIVELY BY MAGES, WOVEN UPON A METEOR'S TRAJECTORY. A PRODUCTION-CLASS ITEM CRAFTED WITH PHANTASMAL-CLASS MATERIALS WHICH ARE EXTREMELY RARE. ITS SPECIAL ABILITY IS TO ABSORB POWER FROM THE POSITION OF CELESTIAL BODIES TO STRENGTHEN ASTRAL-ELEMENT SPELLS.

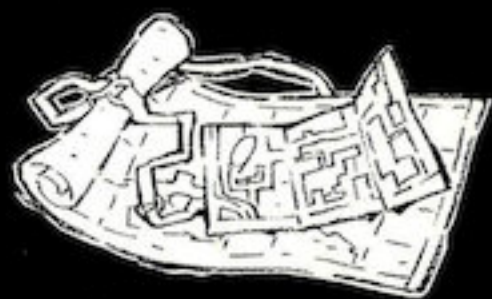


▶ ITEM 3:

[MILLENNIUM BIRD'S CROW]

TALISMAN MADE OF PIECE OF WOOD FROM THE SACRED TREE <VENDIRIA> WHICH WAS SCATTERED WHEN THE SACRED BIRD WAS BORN. CONTAINING THE LIFE OF THE IMMORTAL, THE EFFECTS THE OF 'MOVEMENT HINDRANCE' STATUS ARE REDUCED.





〈地図〉

迷子の必須アイテム。
しかし、迷子には書けない。

Part 1

A tree stump a few meters tall was there--just as he had guessed. He went around that stump and made a turn at the two-story building. It was right where he remembered it.

Green moss had spread throughout the land. The asphalt, once ubiquitous, appeared infrequently here and there. Shiroe dashed through the ruins. The buildings stood in close succession, coiled and sometimes pierced by giant, ancient trees.

He was running past scenery that he hadn't seen before, yet it still felt somewhat familiar to him.

There were silhouettes of people curled up in the streets.

These were likely Adventurers in the same situation as Shiroe. Their moans and screams made Shiroe forcibly suppress the fear that gradually rose up in his throat.

But he was barely putting up a show.

"What's happening?"

"I-I'm...strange, what's this?!"

"S-Someone get out here! Hey, game master! Are you listening?!"

Their screams sounded like dying animals.

Those excessively miserable screams brought back a tiny amount of composure in Shiroe. To not scream like that was the sole thought keeping him going.

(I can move my body as I like...it's uncomfortable because the size of my limbs seems to be slightly different...thankfully, not by much.)

What spread before his eyes was the city of Akiba.

Many abandoned buildings were intertwined with ivy, reaching out vigorously from the asphalt here and there. The vines blended with the ancient, spirit-blessed trees. Nostalgia washed over him. This was the hometown of many players, the largest city of the Japanese server of Elder Tales.

"Akiba? Ridiculous! Have I gone nuts?! Someone, someone, answer me!"

A man cowering nearby shouted. Everyone was dressed as a citizen of a Middle-Ages fantasy world, wearing full-length clothing or even armor.

That was normal.

Elder Tales was the world's largest class of massive online games with a theme based on a world of

swords and magic.

But then, it was 'just a game'.

The wind brushing onto Shiroe's cheeks was cold, moist and refreshing, like he was in the middle of a thick forest.

The air was different from the dry and somewhat prickly air in Tokyo where Shiroe lived. The wind, twisted with the smell of greenery, told him that this place wasn't the world he was familiar with.

Shiroe shook his head and thought back.

He was playing Elder Tales.

He remembered facing his desk at home and enjoying the game displayed on his LCD monitor.

Elder Tales was actually a long-running title, boasting a 20-year history. Of course, its contents and game engine were replaced with the latest version by frequent software updates, but its abundance of data and deep game traditions accumulated from its long operation were what won the popularity of its users.

Today should have been the day to commemorate the release of the 12th expansion pack of Elder Tales. The data he had downloaded beforehand would be lifted of its restricted status and would bring about new items, new zones, new monsters and battles; and, above all else, raise the level cap of the world of Elder Tales.

Today was also the very day the expansion pack was brought live, so there should be a great number of players connected to the game world. Shiroe didn't have a sound way of investigating that, but the fact that many of his friends were connected was confirmed from his Friend List.

Shiroe was a veteran player in Elder Tales.

He started this game when he was in middle school, and had been playing it for 8 years.

There were over 100,000 players in Japan alone. The number of fans worldwide exceeded 20,000,000. The massive online game had mesmerized Shiroe for a long time.

He had, of course, been looking forward to this expansion pack; however, he felt awkward about frolicking about it like a newbie, so he decided to pass time as usual. He'd been practicing hunting at a beginner area, tutoring a pair of twins with some general advice and explaining the usage of items.

But there his memory was abruptly cut.

Shiroe remembered seeing some sort of demo. Words of shining flames in a black scene. The sky was filled with sticky darkness like asphalt scrolling quickly and a white moon that cut out that blackness.

However, that was it.

And now, Shiroe was running in Akiba as his own pair of legs that had turned real kicked off the ground.

A rhythmic sound like that of a xylophone being played rang in his ears.

This familiar chime was an alert notifying him of an incoming telepathic call.

Shiroe concentrated on his forehead in a way like he was squinting his eyes and selected a menu that appeared in his mind. After being sent flying to this game world and letting go of the panic he felt at first, Shiroe had quickly picked up these controls.

"You here yet, Shiro?"

"I'm almost there!"

Shiroe listened to the voice of his dear old friend as he made another right turn at an abandoned building on the verge of collapse.

The clear sound of him cutting through the top of the trees and a humid smell were carried by the gentle breeze. And then there was the dazzling light.

This brightness was something one couldn't experience unless one witnessed it in early summer. Under the cool winds, instead of bringing heat, the sun rays simply burst with white radiance. A pure, overwhelming intensity of light.

The city was illuminated by the light of early summer. The ancient giant trees and buildings cast deep black shadows on the main streets covered in black soil and asphalt. The contrast was beautiful.

The scene that was spreading out before Shiroe's eyes was something he had seen countless, countless times: the hometown of the game world, the city of Akiba.

However, that scene had an overwhelming sense of realism that was impossible for a game and it was enveloping Shiroe completely.

Shiroe was sprinting in this scenery with his very own legs.

Every step he took, he felt the slipperiness of wet moss crushed by his sole. He felt his heart strongly pumping his blood to every nook and cranny of his body, which was heating up from the exercise.

This was something he couldn't doubt; this was reality.

The city was, indeed as Shiroe remembered it, the city of Akiba.

The crumbling ruins, the repeatedly extending Barrack bars, and the old trees spreading their roots on the roads were all swallowed by a green forest even as they coexisted. This was the game setting of the holy ground of the ancients. This was Akiba.

Within the League of Freedom Towns Eastal, east of Arching Archipelago Yamato, Akiba was the hometown of the players and the core city of the Japanese server in Elder Tales.

He ran through the center of the street and made a turn at a corner of a three-story inn-and-bar.

The crumbling ruins were buildings made of concrete: Suftek, Yashikayama Electronics, Kulta Tower, *etc.* Various buildings and famous places gave the impression of the real world's Akihabara, and they were reconstructed as ruins of an older era in Elder Tales.

The legacies of the old era were sleeping here and there in this world. They could be giant underground ruins or towers that pierced the skies. This city of Akiba was a legacy itself.

As if clinging on, buildings made of logs were extending the giant concrete structures that were on the verge of becoming rubble, and all of that was embraced within the bosom of the ancient trees. The scenery was miraculous.

After Shiroe arrived, Naotsugu, who was sitting on concrete debris, stood up and received him.

The lights shone in from holes without window frames in the wall, illuminating the two of them better than any game engine could have managed.

Naotsugu looked pale, but he still laughed heartily and slapped his sheath.

He was a bit more than 1.8m tall, wearing dull but remarkably strong steel armor over his sturdy body. Naotsugu had a shield on his back and looked like an ancient heroic warrior in his get-up.

"Hi, Shiro!"

"Naotsugu, eh... good morning."

Shiroe didn't know how to react when he heard Naotsugu's greeting, and fell back on this plain cold greeting.

Elder Tales had a standard voice chat system; players were able to communicate while playing the game by using speakers and a microphone, like chatting on the phone. Some players didn't like to use voice chat and insisted on text messages, but Shiroe and Naotsugu were not like that.

That was why Shiroe remembered and was very familiar with Naotsugu's voice.

Naotsugu Hasegawa.

If anyone asked Shiroe who was the most reliable person in the game, he would be among the first few choices that came to mind.

Online gaming referred to playing a game through the Internet. Elder Tales was a 'Massively Multiplayer Online' or 'Massively Multiuser Online' game. Several hundreds or thousands of players would be connected to the same game space to play this game. In other words, this type of game allowed players to know many other players, working or competing with each other.

Shiroe had played Elder Tales for many years, so he knew quite a lot of people in the game. But the people you knew in the game remained in the game. Different people might have different playing styles and opinions, but most people would not reveal their real identity in the game world.

With the increase in online crimes after the year 2000, protecting your personal data was common sense

for the online community.

But that didn't mean you couldn't make real friends.

Naotsugu knew Shiroe's real name... meaning Shiroe gave him his contact details and was one of the few players that had met with him offline as well.

Shiroe let out a sigh of relief when he heard Naotsugu's voice.

They might have met in person before, but they had spent much more time conversing through the game screen. Naotsugu spent countless nights with Shiroe in the Debauchery Tea Party, visiting countless border zones, experiencing countless battles together. He was one of the players in Elder Tales whom Shiroe was great friends with.

They had chatted about so many things under the skies.

They even discussed their boring feelings. Naotsugu was completely unlike a friend he only met in a game.

For Shiroe, this cheerful and reliable voice was the symbol of Naotsugu.

"What's this situation? Did Elder Tales evolve to this level while I wasn't playing? To be honest, this is too real for me -- this isn't possible with just improving the level of particle effects and rendering machines right? Is this a joke?"

Naotsugu pouted as he asked Shiroe. His cheerful and chatty voice sounded a bit depressed.

"This is nerve wrecking."

Shiroe vaguely nodded and raised the magic staff in his hand.

(Come on, this is a magic staff, magic staff.)

This was a commonly seen item in fantasy games and was just up to Shiroe's shoulder in height. It was made by grinding and bending a long and slender tree branch and reinforcing it with metal... just like a magic staff used by mages.

The only place you could find this was in a role-playing store.

He probably noticed Shiroe's silent reproach.

Naotsugu bent his head to check himself out. He was wearing steel armor that seemed to weigh dozens of kilograms, with a shield on his back and a sword with an elegant hilt on his waist. Naotsugu looked like a warrior in a fantasy setting.

"Eh, I look like a role player myself."

"That's right."

Even though they were not sounds of joy, the two of them looked at each other and laughed.

"Now that you mention you... look the same."

"You too."

The two of them observed each other's appearance.

Shiroe and Naotsugu were basically game characters in Elder Tales. The characters in the game were originally constructed using 3D models, a far cry from the real world. But the two of them existed for real in this world, in which everything was as detailed as reality.

But if you looked closely, this was not turning the game into reality. As a game, the characters of Elder Tales were designed for both males and females.

Since it was a monthly subscription game, there were very few players who intentionally chose ugly appearances. To meet the demand of the players, the market would use beautiful 3D models.

But Naotsugu was not just turning his stylish character in Elder Tales into reality. Shiroe had seen him in real life several times, and he looked exactly like Shiroe remembered.

"Naotsugu, your face looks very similar to your real face, doesn't it?"

With the scar that ran through the brow of his game character gone, Naotsugu's face revealed his own bright eyes with slightly drooping corners. His adult face had a boyish grin on his lips.

"You too, Shiro, a scholarly man with glasses and wicked beady eyes."

There were friends who described Shiroe this way, and his features seemed to be reflected on this body. As Shiroe thought about this, he gave the standard answer he used countless times: "Can you just ignore that?"

"What is the current situation? Tell me if you know anything, 'Black Heart Glasses'."

"I personally want to tell you, but I don't know anything."

Shiroe and Naotsugu kicked away the shattered debris and sat down. Shiroe didn't have any information to explain the current situation.

Compared to the suburban area Shiroe woke up in, this was closer to the center of Akiba. If you listened carefully, you could hear the buzz of the city from here.

"Firstly, this is not a dream."

"Yeah."

Shiroe nodded and agreed to Naotsugu's inquiry.

When he regained conscious, he was in a familiar place... that didn't exist in the real world, which seemed like the game he was playing. Elder Tales was a fantasy game with the world of sword and sorcery as its backdrop. Players could create their characters, Adventurers, and travel through the world from their characters' view.

The body that Shiroe was controlling like his own was a character he controlled in the game, 'Shiroe'. But the appearance of this character seemed to reflect the real face of Shiroe.

"Have you seen the status screen?"

"I have."

Since Elder Tales was a game, the strength, stamina and all sorts of abilities were represented in the form of numbers. All sorts of commands in the game were input through the menu.

There were no such game-related screens anywhere you looked in this world. If you focused on your forehead region, the world would present a translucent status screen displaying all sorts of values and graphs. By controlling the cursor with your mind, you could perform all sorts of action. Both of them realized this about half an hour after waking up.

They also discovered the telepathy function. This was a function to contact your friends that were online in the game. In the Elder Tales world, this function was similar to a cell phone, allowing players to contact their friends from far away.

However, they could only contact people registered on their friend list.

Focusing on his forehead and browsing his friend list desperately with rusty controls, Shiroe had been shocked and he shouted when he discovered that Naotsugu was online.

Naotsugu was surprised when Shiroe contacted him through telepathy, but he quickly agreed to meet up at the ruins nearby.

"..."

"..."

The silence hung between them as both of them thought about what to say. But the answer was obvious, Shiroe had a better grasp of the situation than Naotsugu. From what Shiroe knew, Naotsugu hadn't logged into Elder Tales in the past two years.

Shiroe told Naotsugu everything he knew.

Everything wasn't much.

If it were about things that happened during the two years when Naotsugu wasn't around, they could have talked all day. But Shiroe had no clue regarding the reason and background as to why they were involved

in this perplexing event.

What he could confirm was that he installed the expansion pack 'Novasphere Pioneers' and was playing with beginners just outside of the city when the incident happened. The place looked the same as the starting point of Elder Tales, Akiba, and they seemed to be in the game world. They had the same bodies as their characters and retained all the items and equipment they had in the game.

(Now that I think about it, how are the twins doing? I need to check on them later.)

But Shiroe didn't know why this was happening.

As Shiroe narrated, Naotsugu listened carefully. When unfamiliar terms popped up he would ask about them, but he didn't interject with his own opinions.

Shiroe didn't like noise. He was fine with lively and festive atmospheres, but he disliked chaotic hustle and bustle. Naotsugu was cheerful and mischievous, but he was smart enough to listen to others.

Their characters differed but they hit it off well, maybe they both had the generosity to compromise with each other.

"I see, eh, alternate world... an alternate world has sucked us in, fantasy has become reality..."

"So Naotsugu, why are you here? Making a comeback?"

Naotsugu replied:

"Yeah, I heard about the new expansion pack, and things at work were calming down so I logged in to take a look..."

... come back.

(So Naotsugu was coming back. So Naotsugu was planning on coming back...)

He recalled that Naotsugu was 2 years his senior.

Shiroe met Naotsugu 4 years ago. Shiroe was already a veteran player in Elder Tales then. It was normal for a middle school student to play with computers in that era, but Shiroe was one of the few homely types. Put simply, even if he went out, his heart was still at home... he was a kid who was lonely even in a crowd.

Even after moving on to high school and college, he maintained this form of entertainment, touring the virtual world every day.

Elder Tales already had a special place among online games back then. If you wanted to play a challenging game with incredible content, it had to be Elder Tales; this was the view of the game amongst the players.

For instance, Elder Tales had a grand vision, the 'Half-Gaia project'. It might sound ridiculous, but the goal of the project was to recreate Earth at half its scale.

The starting city for Japanese server was Akiba, corresponding to Tokyo in the Japan archipelago. North American servers had the 'Big Apple' and 'South Angel' as starting cities. Japanese and American servers were just convenient names to refer to. The online world was made up of many different servers connected to each other, so it was theoretically possible to head for other continents or even the end of the world. Hence, one of the selling points of Elder Tales was the ability of players to travel to other servers, something normal MMOs could not emulate.

The Half-Gaia project was a long term goal; the current game was not a perfect rendition of the real world.

In Elder Tales, the world was divided into many zones, each with its own territory and boundaries.

The vast sea of trees in Mount Fuji was a zone where ferocious monsters lurked, the dungeon Shinshuku Metro Complex was a stage for adventure, and the city of Akiba was a non-combat zone.

Going deeper, a room in a hotel was also a small zone. Some zones could be traded. If you accumulated enough in-game coins, you could be a land-or home-owner.

All zones were connected in their own ways. Open plains, for example, didn't have boundary demarcations, so players weren't able to tell which zone they were actually in. When they moved across zones, they wouldn't even notice.

Some zones had obvious demarcations, like some buildings and rooms, which were individual zones connected elsewhere through a door.

From what Shiroe knew, the Japanese server managed tens of thousands of zones.

With such a scale, the developing company had to outsource to other major gaming companies, and knowledgeable veteran players like Shiroe were convenient reliable existences.

Shiroe had been invited by many guilds during his long tenure in the game, and had joined a guild temporarily, thinking of it as a trial.

Guilds were the most common way for players to form a group in Elder Tales.

After entering a guild, players could access the guild account in the bank and use the guild warehouse to manage their equipment easily as well as other convenient services. The guild members kept in touch with each other so it was easy to form raid parties.

So most players in Elder Tales joined a guild since it was convenient and had many benefits.

Since Shiroe liked to research the game contents and even got news from foreign servers, his knowledge was better than that of other veteran players who had played as long as he had. From this perspective, Shiroe was someone who could contribute greatly to whichever guild he chose to join.

No player could grasp the details of all the zones perfectly; Shiroe was also not a genius of that level. But

things like main routes, the connections between zones, or the transport devices known as Fairy Rings could shorten your transportation time greatly. What you could buy at which zone or where you could hunt for a specific monster, this knowledge needed to be accumulated slowly over time.

Countless zones, endless varieties of items and monsters, missions known as quests, all kinds of ancient lore and knowledge... and anything else the developers could think of. The culmination of all these was Elder Tales.

But Shiroe could not get used to relationships that included elements of convenience and benefit. He had mellowed out now, but the Shiroe back then was much more stubborn and naive... and an embarrassing neat freak.

Even if Shiroe didn't make many requests of others, he didn't know how to decline others.

He didn't reject them, but his feelings didn't accept them either.

There were all sorts of people in the game world. As long as there were people, there would be both pure and impure relationships. For the middle-school Shiroe, this might have been too shocking.

Shiroe noticed that he was being used like a walking encyclopedia. Along with his high-level character, he was dragged around like an all-purpose tool to fight for the convenience of others.

Shiroe couldn't adjust to this type of relationship or reject it tactfully, so he chose to leave the guild and mingle with others in temporary raid parties by himself.

Before Shiroe realized it, he had become a famous solo player with both deep knowledge and a high-level character. As his fame grew, he fell deeper into solitude.

Naotsugu met him when Shiroe was starting to get stronger and travel alone, having given up on guilds. Shiroe was starting to grow numb to the feeling of solitude.

Shiroe and Naotsugu met in the Debauchery Tea Party.

The Debauchery Tea Party was not a guild. It was just the Debauchery Tea Party. There was no other way to describe it. It was just a group of players who 'just' happened to congregate there.

Even though they 'just' happened to be there, but they were 'always' there and 'ready' to go.

... that was the place Shiroe belonged to.

The guilds they joined were different.

Their characters were not the same.

They had nothing in common.

They just gathered in the ruined building. Sometimes in the plains, other times on the hills where you

could see the stars.

This group went on adventures.

Elder Tales was a sword-and sorcery-style fantasy world, set thousands of years into the future. This was the setting the players bought into.

According to the legend of Elder Tales, there had been a massive war on earth, shattering the old world, which was miraculously reconstructed by the gods into this one.

This was a common mythical setting seen in fantasy games.

Common mythical monsters like orcs, goblins, trolls, giants, chimeras, and hydras roamed the lands.

Most players found joy in battling. Gaining EXP and leveling up after defeating monsters, looting powerful and rare treasures; this was the common way to play Elder Tales.

But this was just grinding and farming, not real adventuring. Fighting repeatedly and adventuring were different things, Shiroe discovered that for the first time in the Debauchery Tea Party. And he could always see 'her' in the Debauchery Tea Party, as well as companions who were helping 'her'. Shiroe was also a companion there.

The people Shiroe met in the Debauchery Tea Party might be the first friends he met in Elder Tales. Naotsugu was one of them.

Part 2

"Since you were coming back, that means your job was stabilizing?"

"Yeah, it is more or less stable. Aye, this has been a hectic year."

The Debauchery Tea Party went on for 2 years, which was the most fulfilling and joyful period in Shiroe's time in Elder Tales. But after some incidents, the Debauchery Tea Party which created many legends came to an end.

One of the reasons was Naotsugu taking a break away from the game.

During the winter of that year, Naotsugu wasn't able to go online for a period of time because of his busy work schedule. Several people also left the game at that point due to personal reasons.

The Debauchery Tea Party was not a guild.

Since it was not a guild, they did not have any obligatory relationships. Although everyone was all grown up and wouldn't say it due to embarrassment, this group... treasured their friendship very much.

It was not decided by anyone, the Debauchery Tea Party just went on an indefinite hiatus. They thought about inviting new friends to carry on the congregation, but that would be a different adventure and story.

Although the Debauchery Tea Party ceasing to function made them sad, no one hung their head in regret. They enjoyed many more adventures than most people that was rewarding enough.

"Work was finally on track and going sort of smoothly right now. What really sucks is that there are no cute girls there."

"That doesn't matter right?"

Shiroe brushed off Naotsugu's complaints.

Naotsugu could be described as a 'hero'. [\[1\]](#)

Shiroe thought Naotsugu had more courage than him. It might be recklessness in some situations, but Shiroe had never seen Naotsugu stop being a chatterbox no matter what happened.

"What's with your eyes? Closet pervert look?"

"I'm not a closet anything."

"Yes you are. There are 2 type of men in this world, open perverts who admit it and closet perverts who don't. I am an open pervert who likes panties, Shiroe is a closet pervert who definitely like panties."

The ridiculous theory made Shiroe pout.

But Shiroe wasn't angry.

Naotsugu had always been sensitive about others and his words were meant to lighten the mood. Even if his dirty jokes might trouble others, Shiroe was a healthy man, so he was also interested in the opposite sex. He knew that he could take this level of joke and conversation.

"I also like... Ah, although I like girls, I still have standards."

"I know personality is important, but you can still be attracted by their appearances."

"... You might be right, but we don't need to stoop so low right?"

"Yeah."

Naotsugu gave a big sigh.

Shiroe nodded, he understood Naotsugu's point.

"Even if work had calmed down, there was no need to take a vacation in the virtual world. And with things like this, can we really go back?"

Naotsugu said jokingly.

All the other players trapped in this world should be asking the same thing. Naotsugu expressing this suffocating problem in such a joking manner showed his mental tenacity and his concern for Shiroe.

"I was thinking, maybe a new god just took over, and had a delusional fantasy." [\[2\]](#)

"It is so cruel to trap us this way. Really, the whole world has turned upside down, is this some type of festival?"

"Yeah, let's not have any expectations that we can go back anytime soon."

"Your way of accepting this situation also seems ruthless."

"Only suicidal people will show mercy when they know what is going on."

"As expected of the tactician of the Tea Party."

Naotsugu replied condescendingly, then shook his head and said with a serious expression.

"Right, no expectations for now. So going by the fantasy novel settings, we need to survive by our own from now on?"

He was not happy about this, but Shiroe nodded and agreed with Naotsugu's questions. According to Shiroe's memory, he had done everything as usual, living normally, taking baths, logging in to Elder Tales, and fighting monsters with the beginner twins before his consciousness was cut off.

Everything he did was about the same as usual, but he was forcefully trapped in this situation.

It might be due to some external factors or some mistake he made, but there was no way for Shiroe to find out.

There might be some way out of this situation and alternate world, but Shiroe didn't know how at this instant.

In other words, be it searching for a way back or going back to the old world by some unknown external mechanism, they needed to live in this world before that happened.

"We might wake up in our old world if we die here, but I wouldn't recommend doing that. Acting like that would be the same as 'borrowing a billion dollars from loan sharks because you think the earth might explode!' "

"Doesn't seem like a wise choice. If dying here meant dying for real, that would be a waste."

"That's right."

"But tactician Shiro, it shouldn't be a problem if we just want to survive right?"

"Is it?"

"We are level 90 right? It might be bad if we needed to challenge a difficult zone, but it shouldn't be hard just living on right? We have money, we have equipment... My equipment is a bit outdated, but it is still serviceable, so there shouldn't be any problem right?"

Elder Tales was a RPG that used level systems, both Shiroe and Naotsugu were at level 90, the previous level cap in this world.

But this was not something worth mentioning, about half the players were level 90.

Elder Tales had a long history and similar to other online games, it had went through hundreds of updates, adding all sorts of game elements.

Although Shiroe didn't experience that period, the level cap when Elder Tales just started was 50. The players enjoyed the Elder Tales world and would grind their characters to the level cap, and request for more adventures from the developers.

To meet these demands, the developers pushed out an expansion pack. It had new enemies, dungeons and adventures, as well as a higher level cap for the heroes to become stronger. There had been several level cap revisions since then; the latest one was 90.

The cap of level 90 came with the 'Sacred Heart' expansion 3 years ago. The official announcement for the 'Novasphere Pioneers' expansion pack included an increased level cap to 100.

This meant the players would have time to grow their Adventurer's avatar.

Before the release of the new expansion pack, half the players were already at the level cap and there was nothing strange about it.

"... I don't think this is it."

"Why?"

Naotsugu was not discouraged even when facing such a situation.

Shiroe admired Naotsugu's optimism. Shiroe didn't have his mental strength.

Shiroe was filled with unease. His heart analyzed the situation as if it were driven by this sense of unease.

"We came to this alternate world... though we do not know if this is simply a game world, but we were sucked into this situation... That is already a strange matter."

"Yeah? Eh, that's not wrong... Hmmm?"

"Simply put, I think 'It is impossible to stumble into an alternate world by normal logic. Since something extraordinary happened, we cannot take anything for granted. So we might get hurt if we take it for granted that we will be fine.'"

Shiroe's words stunned Naotsugu for a while, and he replied with a resisting expression.

"Your syllogism sounds really nasty." [\[3\]](#)

"My point is that we can't ignore this too."

"You have a point, but..."

Naotsugu clenched and unclenched his fist repeatedly, maybe he was doubting the reliability of his level 90 body.

"I want to make another thing clear, you might have missed it because of the uproar... But the new expansion pack should be in effect now."

"Novasphere Pioneers right?"

"Yeah, this means there will be new equipment, monsters, quest and more zones as well right? They might have remodeled some areas too."

"Now that you mention it... that is absolutely right."

Shiroe shifted his gaze away from Naotsugu and continued:

"Magic seems to work here. Choosing the magic from the menu is dangerous and slow in a live battle, but if we set it on the hotkey, we can cast spells after a short cast time, I have confirmed this."

"Yeah, I tried that too, all the skills I learned can be executed."

"But that doesn't mean we can win battles."

"Is that so?"

"How tall are you Naotsugu? I mean in real life."

"183cm, same as my game character."

Naotsugu rubbed the top of his head.

"I see, so there should be no strange sensation for you. There is several cm difference between me and my character's height, so it feels a bit off. Eh, something like wearing shoes with thick soles... If the length of the limbs are different, this sensation is even more obvious. There are some differences between this body and our real body, this is not the body we are familiar with. Even if we can use swords or magic, how accustomed we are to fighting is an unknown."

"Ah, you are right, that is a bunch of troublesome problems."

"... Another important matter is the difficulty in checking the status screen."

Naotsugu had a surprised face as Shiroe carried on.

"We can see the status screen by focusing on our forehead. If we form a party, we should be able to see each other's HP, but to do that in live battle will be hard. I'm still fine, but for Naotsugu who is on the frontline, it will be difficult to keep track of the status screen while fighting the enemies in front of you."

"You mean it is difficult to fight?"

"I think it is better to keep this in mind."

He did not explain it to Naotsugu, but the field of vision was crucial as well. You could make your point of view wider if you were playing from the monitor and see things from a wider angle. But currently, they could only see at an angle of 120 degrees in front of them.

Take trolls and giants as examples, fighting these huge foes would create blind spots that weren't there before... There were tons of problems in terms of battles.

"Anything else?"

"Also..."

"What is it, is it hard to say?"

Shiroe was surprised by his own troubled sigh.

Frankly, the issues with battles and the difference in game environment were trivial. It could be troublesome and more challenging, but Shiroe thought this was something they could overcome.

The things he wanted to say made Shiroe's heart heavy, he had been buying time by talking about unimportant things to prepare himself.

"What is it, famous tactician?"

Although Naotsugu called him that, Shiroe was not fit to be a tactician.

Shiroe would voice his thoughts because it was Naotsugu, but Shiroe was used to thinking about all sorts of things by himself.

Because of his attention to minute details, the Debauchery Tea Party gave him the nickname of 'tactician'. He had a way with words, so he took on the duty of planning and coordinating battles.

"... The Japanese server of Elder Tales has 1,200,000 registered characters with 100,000 consistent players."

"Hmmm? That is correct."

For players like Shiroe, such numbers were common sense.

"Today is the release of the new expansion pack, so there are more people online than usual. From the ratio of the people who are online on my friend list, I estimate about 30,000 people are online. At this point, this should be correct... This alternate world is accommodating 30,000 Japanese, I am not sure about the North America, Europe, or China server though."

Naotsugu nodded in agreement.

"So there are 30,000 people here..."

Shiroe didn't use the word players intentionally.

"We have no laws or government."

Part 3

Naotsugu headed towards the city with Shiroe.

They tried to discuss further, but they lacked information to talk about so they couldn't conclude anything. They needed to focus on getting information for now.

This was common sense while playing Elder Tales, but they weren't sure if it was applicable now.

To play it safe, Naotsugu and Shiroe formed a party.

Parties were a way for people to interact, it meant a battle team. Unlike guilds, parties were temporary groups allowing you to check each others' HP and status if you were in it together. They could tell each others' distance and direction when in the same zone.

Akiba was a non-combat zone.

If you fought here, no matter if your opponent was a NPC or a normal player, the city guards would rush over in an instance and send the guilty party to jail. If the perpetrator attacked the guard, they would be executed on-site.

There were many characters not controlled by players in Elder Tales. They were the NPCs in the game system, known in this world as People of the Land.

They mostly worked as shopkeepers selling all sorts of things, or helped with administration such as guild registration. They also acted like pedestrians in the streets, interacting with players by providing information or quests.

Since all the guards were higher than level 100, the players were unable to resist them.

Monsters wouldn't appear in the city. According to common sense in Elder Tales, this was one of the safe regions in this world.

It was like summer once they exited the abandoned building, with the humid wind blowing across the whole city. The smell of mud was in the air, and the grass and leaves swayed with the wind.

This scenery was too natural, making the idea 'we are in a game' vaporize from Shiroe's mind. The presence of this world in his senses was too strong. The feeling of being in an alternate world was getting firmer; this was nothing like a game.

Making a turn at the avenue, they reached a major road with four lanes. At the corner was a high tech building made with composite materials, looking like a memorial. Head straight along the Akiba main road junction and you would reach the city square in front of the metro. Every building was either collapsed or covered in vines, slowly being replaced by giant ancient trees.

This was not like Akiba in the real world, a high tech city made with glass and steel.

The colorful signboards and flashy decorations were broken, either slanting or broken in half, hanging off the giant silver leafed trees growing beside it.

The roads had been completely eroded by mud, and glimpses of the asphalt surface could only be seen on the major roads. The alleys were covered with mud and moss just like a trail in a natural park.

The hybrid cars that had been abandoned since ancient times were enveloped by grass and were the habitat of small animals.

This might be a sad sight, but it was still beautiful, like a painting in a way. It was not a polished kind of beauty, but the abandoned buildings decorated with the many colors of nature were full of life and vitality.

The players and NPCs occupied these ruins as their home and set up stalls and shops on the road side, giving it a feeling of a bazaar. This was the same as Shiroe's home town in Elder Tales.

If it were the usual Elder Tales, there would be many players gathered in front of the city square, and people would set up shop and sell things to other players. Others would kill time here by waiting for comrades to go out for raids, it was a place full of life.

But this place was full of confusion, chaos, and a complicated sense of frustration now.

He could see at least a few hundred players here.

Not only this, the surrounding ruins and narrow alleys that overlooked the plaza... he can also feel the stares of people standing on the deteriorated high-speed rails.

Everyone must be here hoping for some form of savior.

The game officials might appear in this place and explain the incident by announcing 'This concludes the event, isn't it impressive everyone?'... They must have gathered here hoping for something like that.

Even the players bearing such whimsical hopes were letting down their guard and conversing with others. The noise volume that he could hear was lower than he expected from such a crowd.

They gathered in clusters all over the place. Some threw worried glances around, some would sob, while others would vent by cursing out loud.

They may have realized unconsciously that anything might happen. But the crowd had no intention of doing anything about it, which annoyed Shiroe.

(Do they plan to sit here forever? Really? Wah, I met someone's gaze!)

Shiroe moved his sight away in surprise.

A pair of sorrowful eyes looked at him pleading for help.

Shiroe didn't think he was mentally weak, but he didn't want to test himself in those muddy eyes.

And...

(... This is irritating.)

Just squatting there like they were paralyzed.

Not doing anything, yet still complaining irritated Shiroe. He could empathize with them, but the sight of a few hundred players looking crestfallen was not good for their psychological health.

Shiroe was able to take action after overcoming his initial dejection by chance, and he got a hold of his emotions after meeting Naotsugu. He was no different than the players sitting there waiting to be saved, and Shiroe understood that. Maybe that was the reason the feeling of irritation was so much stronger for him.

"Shiroe? Isn't that Shiro-bouyan?"

That came from a female voice. It was not too loud, but in this quiet and depressed atmosphere, the cheerful bell-like voice attracted a lot of attention.

Shiroe turned and looked for the source in surprise.

"Mary-nee, Mary-nee. That was too loud. This... This is too prominent!"

"It's like a funeral procession here, what is the problem with that?"

Shiroe was pulled by Maryele's hand. The woman who ignored Shiroe's words and kept on talking was a female player Maryele, also known as Mary-nee. [\[4\]](#)

"You came at the right time, I was just looking for Shiro-bou."

"... Eh, may I ask, why were you looking for me?"

"Woo wah, what a beautiful lady. Shiro, where were you hiding this hot chick? You panties pervert."

"Please don't use the word panties now, Naotsugu."

The three of them left the city square slowly and entered an inconspicuous alley. They didn't leave because they did anything wrong, but the atmosphere in the city square might give them tummy aches. And they were talking to Maryele who was more famous than Shiroe, so they had to be aware of their surroundings as well.

"What an impatient boy you are Shiro-bou, bringing me to a place like this."

"That's not what I want."

"So you found a girlfriend; that was quick."

"That's not it. Sorry. Sorry. Ah, this is Naotsugu."

"I am Naotsugu, friend of Shiroe... How may I address you?"

"I am Maryele, you can call me Marie or Mary-nee. Wow wow! Naotsugu-yan is handsome too! You guys are a combo?"^[5]

Maryele laughed gently. Although Shiroe was observing her and trying to see if she had any hidden meaning behind this, there was no sign of malicious intent in her smiling face. She was hard to deal with because she meant what she said.

Maryele, who was smiling so warmly despite the situation that they were in, was a Cleric.

There were 12 classes in Elder Tales, all the players, meaning all the Adventurers, had to choose one of these classes to begin their adventure. Among the 3 healer classes, Clerics had the strongest healing abilities.

Healers helped survivability but were weak in attack, a class suitable for adventuring with parties but not acting alone. The principle of the healer class was to assist others, players who chose this class were usually introverts, but Maryele was an exception.

Wearing a long white robe for healers and a head of long green hair, she was an elf which usually had a cute appearance. She looked just like she did in Elder Tales. Because it was a game world, all the players were hunks and beauties, but some players just had the charms to attract the goodwill of others.

In Elder Tales which had a voice chat function, this was even more obvious. Maryele who was from Osaka had a cheerful voice and helpful nature, a lot of players knew her. Instead of just being popular with the opposite sex, she was popular with everyone because of her forthright style.

Maryele would not act like a spoiled girl and was admired by people of both genders. Shiroe was a veteran player so he knew a lot of people. But Maryele was different from Shiroe, a player who enjoyed helping others and had a wide network of friends.

She was the guild master of the Crescent Moon Alliance which had about a dozen or so members. She would hold parties in the pub in Akiba frequently, so she was well known in Elder Tales.

"You have such a gloomy expression."

"... Eh, that's still okay."

(Do I look so gloomy?) Shiroe worried.

Having a long face was normal in this situation, but he thought about how his facial features in the real world would reflect on the body of this world.

In the real world, Shiroe had been described as having 'wicked eyes'. He didn't use contacts to avoid looking even scarier.

In the Elder Tales that had become reality, hearing others call him gloomy made Shiroe think they had discovered his wicked eyes feature from the real world, so he was a bit frantic.

(But Mary-nee is also...)

Looking at Maryele, you could see that there were some differences between her and the typical forest elves.

"Anyway, I also don't want to be gloomy and I can understand how you feel. I have had enough, this is so ridiculous that I'm feeling psychotic."

Bright hazel eyes, the contours of an elf with a hint of nobility, the slightly thick brows, and a big mouth that was smiling warmly. You could tell from her face that she was kind and warm, just how Maryele would look like.

He had never seen Maryele in person before, but Shiroe could feel that 'Ahah, this is indeed Mary-nee'.

"What kind of look is this? Hmmph, you must be thinking this is not my style right?"

Maryele touched Shiroe's forehead gently with her finger.

"My joking nature is my hobby, but the jokes I am making now are escapism. I'm really troubled right now."

"Is she always like this, Shiro?"

"Yeah, she is always like this."

"But is she pretending right now?"

"I can't tell the difference."

Maryele's words surprised Naotsugu, but Naotsugu was beginning to understand her personality. Maryele laughed loudly at Naotsugu's reservations towards her, but she stopped and sighed under the stares of Shiroe and Naotsugu.

"Aye, hmmm... The situation is bad."

"Yes... want to exchange information?"

"That's fine, where should we start? No, I remember, hmmm, let's be careful and talk at my place. Would you mind, Naotsugu-yan?"

Maryele invited them to her guild hall.

They could relax there, so the trio went around the Fullerger hotel and headed towards the guild building.

The guild building was a facility available in all cities and they usually housed other facilities, forming a multipurpose mega structure.

For Akiba, the guild building itself was a zone with several NPCs working in the lobby. They were the staff of this guild building, you could form a guild by going to them. Players could join or withdraw from a guild by talking to them and going through the administrative process.

There was also a branch of the bank here. Everyone in this game world had a bank account used to deposit cash or valuable items.

There was also another important function for the guild building, the rental of guild halls. Guild halls were independent mid-sized zones, ranging from 3 to 10 rooms of living space that doubled as an office.

Some zones were open for sale in Elder Tales and players could buy and own them. They could set permissions for the purchased zone to allow the entry of specific players and design the interior of the zone as they liked, so many players also bought a small-to medium-sized area as their residence.

Although it was purchased, they needed to pay maintenance fee apart from the indicated price. The upkeep fee is 0.2% of the sale price per month, so only players with a certain amount of wealth would dare to buy it.

That's how guild halls came about, a zone that was specially made for guilds to rent. A guild that had a large enough scale would rent a guild hall in the guild building. This way, items, ingredients and crafted items could be stored there, it also allowed members to gather and interact.

Crescent Moon Alliance was such a guild, having their own personal space in this guild building.

Shiroe and Naotsugu walked up the stairs to the 2nd floor of the guild building.

Going through a set of double doors, Shiroe and Naotsugu registered as visitors and entered the guild hall of Crescent Moon Alliance.

The guild halls in Akiba guild building had a basic retro design. Even though it was a basic design, it was just because of the floor and wallpaper that it gave off this feeling.

You could decorate the zone you rented or bought any way you wanted to. The guild hall of Crescent Moon Alliance had been cleaned thoroughly by its members, making it a comfortable place.

The walls were wooden veneer, giving it a warm familial feeling.

"We won't disturb other people here, right?"

Maryele walked further into the guild hall as she said this.

Part 4

"Come in. Ah, no need to hold back, take a seat. Please take a seat too, Naotsugu."

After entering a room deep within the guild hall, Maryele pounced on a couch full of pink pillows and gestured for Shiroe and Naotsugu to sit.

"This is quite a feminine room."

"That's right. I am a guild master after all, so my room needs to reflect the dignity of a guild master."

Pink pillows, teddy bears, a princess bed, a painting of a noble-looking dog, and curtains with yellow laces. These decorations, in Shiroe's eyes, had nothing to do with the word dignity. Shiroe felt distraught staying in a place like this.

He wouldn't feel this way if it were a screen from a game, but he could feel this atmosphere as he entered this space for real.

He felt restless like an intruder in a private room. Fortunately it was the forthright Maryele's room; if it was the private room of any other girl, Shiroe would have definitely retreated.

But even if the decor was too flashy, the room of the guild master was very spacious. They also had 5-6 rooms for storage and workspace, a rental for a guild hall like this must be quite high.

(Hmmm, 40,000 with an upkeep of 80... about this kind of price right?)

Shiroe estimated in secret. This was the first time he was invited into this guild hall.

"How is your side coping with this, Mary-nee?"

"There are 19 people online including me, 18 of us are in Akiba. Everyone is afraid and is staying inside the guild hall... Ah, don't be too concerned, they won't hear us if we aren't too noisy."

Maryele should have been prepared for this as she answered Shiroe's query smoothly.

18 in Akiba, meaning 1 of them was in another zone. Shiroe found out after asking, that member was on an errand in another city.

"From what we know, Shibuya, Minami, Susukino and Nakasu are in the same state."

This meant all 5 cities in Akiba's server were in the same situation. Maryele should have confirmed this using her wide network of friends.

"Could it be that..."

"That's right, the intercity transport gate has stopped functioning, we have been isolated."

Maryele answered Naotsugu's queries, this was new information.

Akiba, Shibuya, Minami, Susukino and Nakasu.

These 5 places were the 5 major player cities in the Japanese server. Apart from these 5 cities, there were also many cities populated by stores and NPCs, but in terms of completeness of available services, these 5 cities were top class.

These 5 major cities had been set to be starting cities as expansion packs increased the game contents. All players on the Japanese servers had to choose one of these 5 cities as their base of operation.

There was also an intercity transport gate in each of them, so it was possible to move instantaneously between these 5 cities... But they were not functioning right now.

"It means that going to Shibuya is still okay, but other cities will be difficult."

"Even if it is Shibuya, eh, how many was it? We need to go through 7-8 zones to reach it?"

"The shortest distance is 4 zones."

Shiroe replied casually. The intercity gates being down was a major problem.

Elder Tales, which had a fantasy setting, used horses or walking as a primary means of transportation for Adventurers. But with the implementation of the Half Gaia Project that created this world at half its scale, traveling this way took too much time. To deal with this issue, the game had Fairy Rings and the intercity transport gates as an alternative means of travel.

The intercity transport gates were set in the player cities, allowing you to teleport instantly to any of the 5 cities. With these gates down, the difficulty of commuting with far away cities had increased rapidly.

Take Susukino for instance, it was situated in Sapporo on the map of Japan, from Akiba... From Tokyo to Susukino, you needed to go through a huge amount of zones, it would take at least a week even in the game.

That was referring to in-game time, but in-game time should be the same as the time of this new reality from the look of things.

"Can you imagine... why did things turn out this way?"

Shiroe and the others could only answer with silence.

Seeing Maryele's dejected expression, Shiroe wished to answer this question, but he didn't have the ability to.

"Cheer up, Oneesan... Things are serious now, but it could be worse."

"Is that so...?"

Naotsugu continued talking to the depressed Maryele:

"Even though we are trapped in this alternate world, there should be tens of thousand of Japanese here, right? Including the hundreds of thousand of players overseas, we have so many people in the same boat as us, so it's not the worse case scenario, right? We have a common language, some money on hand, and we can still talk in this room after barging into this world, isn't this the best evidence? I haven't confirmed it yet, but our stamina seems to have strengthened according to our character's status, we can use swords and magic. In other words, we have been given the basic ability to survive in this world. Compared to classic fantasy novels where the characters travel to an alternate world, we are much more fortunate, you can even say it is a piece of cake."

Naotsugu encouraged her strongly.

"Are you familiar with such things, Naotsugu?"

"I'm quite alright, I've read quite a bit about this when I was still schooling."

Even though it was a pointless question, Shiroe was still impressed by Naotsugu. That made a lot of sense. He was used to seeing things pessimistically, that's why he missed the cheerful part.



"Yeah... You are right!"

Maryele seemed to be the same.

She looked at Naotsugu with gratitude and hugged him all of a sudden.

"Yeah! You're right! Naotsugu-yan! Impressive! I'm so moved, you have saved me!"

"Hold on, hmmm? What's with her?"

Naotsugu struggled under Maryele's embrace, but Maryele ignored him and hugged him tight.

"Marie? You have visitors?"

A lady wearing spectacles knocked as she entered. She had an awkward expression as she looked at Maryele and Naotsugu.

"Sorry to intrude, Henrietta-san."

"Hello, Shiroe-sama.. Should I come back later?"

"I was hoping you could stop her."

"On it. Really... Hey Marie! Don't act in such a shameful manner!"

The lady entering on Shiroe's request was Henrietta in charge of the guild's accounts. She pulled Maryele back by her shoulders and lectured her.

"Wah! Henrietta? I heard some great opinions, Naotsugu-yan is right! He gave such a great speech!"

"I'm not asking about this! Now is a crucial period, consider the situation!"

Seeing the blushing and exhausted Naotsugu and the interaction between Maryele and Henrietta, Shiroe laughed.

Henrietta was a core member of the Crescent Moon Alliance and on good terms with Shiroe.

She was a Bard in charge of the guild's finances, a competent character. From Shiroe's perspective, he felt close to her since they both wore glasses. But looking at Henrietta in this alternate world, he felt this feeling was just his one-sided opinion.

With wavy blonde hair, an oval face and sharp chestnut eyes, she had a beautiful style like a secretary. She was wearing office clothing that showed off her mature and graceful beauty, which suited her very well.

Shiroe was just a graduate student who liked gaming. When their eyes met, Shiroe felt he could not handle her.

After Henrietta joined in, the four of them talked about their experiences so far and summarized their

situation... But it had only been half a day, they still didn't really understand what happened.

"What should we do now..."

"I think we should get in touch with our comrades through telepathy to avoid any confusion."

Henrietta made a calm suggestion and Shiroe agreed. Don't think too far ahead, just do what you could for now, or you would be swallowed up by the current state of affairs. This was what Shiroe felt.

"That is correct Marie. Shiroe-sama and Naotsugu-sama both made good points. Fortunately we have a guild hall, so for sleeping at night... It might be a bit of a squeeze, but I think it would be better for everyone to sleep here for now."

"That's right..."

Henrietta and Maryele's conversation made Naotsugu flinch.

"What is it, Naotsugu?"

"Nothing, just that this is so sudden, I'm not sure what to do."

Naotsugu denied in a hurry when he heard Shiroe's question. He was always making dirty jokes but seemed so weak to direct attacks.

"Is Naotsugu-yan weak against breasts? Want to touch?"

Naotsugu averted his eyes at Maryele's words, although he still took a peek. Breasts held the hopes and desires of men after all.

(Mary-nee is a beauty with a big bust after all, I can understand.)

Shiroe agreed in his heart.

Shiroe was also bullied by Maryele when they first met. But Shiroe insisted on putting on the attitude of 'Ah? What about these 2 lumps of fat? They're heavy, please take them away'.

There was no need to emphasize on it, that was just Shiroe trying to be vain.

The Elder Tales then was just a game so that the teasing was just through the conversation, while the screen showed their characters sticking together. Maryele had stopped teasing Shiroe this way recently, since she probably got bored of it.

"Why is this oneechan acting so bold? It's scary."

"Marie came from a girls' school, and Osaka people will become like that in those kinds of environments... Marie?! It doesn't matter since this is a game, but now is a crucial period so restrain yourself!"

Maryele bore Henrietta's lecture with a dejected expression. The fact that she would humbly accept criticism, even though she was the guild master, was Maryele's good point.

Shiroe did not join any guild and didn't trust the guild system, but that didn't mean he disliked players in guilds.

It had been several years since he developed his hate of guilds. He didn't really get over it, but he was able to accept it now.

He had formed parties with Maryele and Henrietta several times; Maryele with her wide network of friends also gave Shiroe a lot of help. If Shiroe was not mistaken, the cheerful Maryele who liked to take care of others would keep her distance from Shiroe who was afraid of personal relationships as a way to show her concern.

(Mary-nee is mature in a different way from Naotsugu.)

She didn't do it to curry favor with Shiroe or to balance their mutually beneficial relationship. The blessings that came along with Maryele's personality and kind nature, she didn't just give to Shiroe, but to all those around her. Shiroe thought so.

(But this type of skinship... is troubling. Ah, right, Naotsugu is similar to me, that's why they hit it off so well...)

The Crescent Moon Alliance members probably gathered here out of their admiration for Maryele. It was a heavy responsibility to take care of almost 20 guild members.

Since Maryele was a trustworthy and kind player, Shiroe decided to explain in detail everything he had considered.

As Shiroe explained Maryele paid special attention about the issues with battles and pointed out questions. She frowned when she heard about the number of people in the server and the conflict the players might get into.

"I see... you are right. After listening to you I think that is very possible. Apart from violent incidents, they might be scams and pranks as well..."

Unlike Shiroe who only needed to look after himself, Maryele needed to protect all her comrades, and she was also a woman as well.

"That's right! Listen to him, oneesan! Don't do that again, you need to have some common sense, having a small brain is not good!"

"Woo! You are right! My breasts are big, but my brain is small! But we just met do you need to be so ruthless Naotsugu-yan? Naotsugu-yan is annoying, idiot! Idiot!"

"Nope, Naotsugu-sama has a point. You need to correct this habit you have of hugging people since high school."

"These things don't matter, right? Henrietta, your real name is Umeko anyway!"

"Ehh! I told you not to use that!"

From the way they interacted, Henrietta and Maryele knew each other in real life. He was not sure how much of this serious topic went into their heads. Shiroe's head started to hurt.

"Really, let's ignore this stupid girl... So we can't solve our current situation any time soon..."

"I think it would be better not to have such expectations."

Shiroe answered Henrietta's question.

"Isn't there something we can do about it..."

Maryele frowned as she said this, unable to accept that. Although he empathized with her, Shiroe had already thought about that. That's why they were collating information now.

The information on hand was too limited.

Among all the things they could do, they prioritized gathering data, but that was not what everyone else would do.

Maryele was not like Shiroe and Naotsugu, she had to protect a lot of people as a guild master. But at the same time, she had more ways to handle things.

Guilds might be a common entity, but their structures varied.

The goals, activities and scale differed for each guild, it was a organization that could be very different from each other.

In terms of contents of activities, an example would be battle guilds. One form of entertainment in Elder Tales was fighting, these type of guilds were made to support the members in battles, their activities were raiding either in the open world or dungeons. Adventurers joined these guilds as it was convenient for them to form parties and fight as a team. Since the members knew each other, they would be more inclined to invite each other to form parties, and their team work would also be better.

Akiba was the biggest city with the highest number of players on the Japanese server, the famous battle guilds were the Black Sword Knights, Honesty, D.D.D and West Wind Brigade.

Another type was production guilds. Apart from the battle abilities of the Elder Tales main classes, there were also all kinds of subclasses. Players who chose a production subclass which could forge items were known as artisans. The levels of the main class and subclass were separated. You could train both at the same time, but there were some who relied solely on the subclass skills to enjoy the joys of running a business quietly in the city.

These type of players would join production guilds which could have a very grand scale. As guilds had the ability to provide ingredients in bulk as well as warehouse usage, they enjoyed more advantages the

more people they had. Famous production guilds in Akiba were Oceanic Systems and The Rodrick Firm.

Maryele's Crescent Moon Alliance was a small-scale adventure support guild. These guilds supported both battles and production, a guild that helped each other and their members to achieve their goal. As they didn't specialize in any domain, their members didn't stand to gain much benefit, but the selling point was the warmth and peaceful atmosphere. Most small guilds belong to the adventure support style.

In this group of guilds, Crescent Moon Alliance enjoyed quite a bit of fame.

They were not as famous or influential as major battle guilds, their income and scale paled in comparison to production guilds, but their support for mid-level players and their flexibility in doing things received a good evaluation from other players.

"Anyway, I think we should protect ourselves."

"Correct. From what I see, there are a lot of girls in this guild, right?"

Henrietta nodded at Shiroe and Naotsugu's points. Although battles were restricted in the city zones, there was no telling what might happen. There were also no ways to confirm the battle restrictions were still in effect.

(We need to find out about this later too.)

Shiroe added a new page to his mental note.

"Also, I think you should recall all the market items you put out for sale."

"Hmmm? Market? Why?"

"Ahah, because..."

The market here referred to the services provided by NPCs in major cities. Players could deposit their goods with specific NPCs and set a price to sell them.

Although the players usually traded among themselves, if they have any excess crafted products or ingredients, the market was a convenient feature.

"Crescent Moon Alliance should have a lot of resources right? I think the members also deposited a lot of items to sell at the market. Even if it is still early, the price might change drastically, the items might have some new effects or new ways of using them. If you can spare the cash, I think it is better not to sell the items you have on hand."

"Yeah, understood, you're right."

"Also, we can't check things online anymore."

Maryele and Henrietta nodded their heads seriously.

When Elder Tales was still a game, Shiroe and the rest were in front of a monitor and could surf the net as they played the game, which was the usual way of playing this game.

Elder Tales was a huge and unbelievably complex game, the amount of information in the game world could not be grasped by any single player.

The trusty tools supporting these players were the online guides.

The maps and features of each zone, how to get to a specific area, what monsters would appear, items, where could you meet which NPC and so on.

Browsing for this information as you played was the common way to play Elder Tales.

Although the online guides were not perfect, it would still contain popular zones or effective ways to grind.

They would also note "places that you should definitely stay away from."

"We came this time to exchange information, and information will be important from now on. Everybody remembers that today is the update of the expansion pack right?"

"The Novasphere Pioneers, correct?"

"Yes, not only new zones, we will also need information... for old zones as well as the city. Right now we can't check online even if we run into any minute problems."

"That's right..."

The 4 of them then proceeded to draw a map centered around Akiba based on what they still remember.

Even though there were tens of thousand of zones in the Japanese server. They also included all the hotel rooms, small ruins, and the personal space rented out to players like this guild hall.

The 'field zones' including the forest, hills, the desolated suburbs and relics, as well as the relative fewer 'dungeon zones' that included the underground metro or gigantic building structures. But such zones still numbered in the thousands, even Shiroe couldn't be sure he remembered all of them clearly.

But Shiroe was still an 8 year veteran player, his knowledge of Elder Tales surpassed other players. Naotsugu was on hiatus for a while, but he still had deep knowledge on the zones in the early eras. The 2 of them compared their recollections with Maryele and Henrietta and drew a serviceable but imperfect map of how the zones were connected.

Writing the the zones and linking them with lines, Shiroe's group listed out hundreds of zone-names surrounding Akiba zone.

Although they didn't know the necessity of investigating all the zones, this was better than nothing.

"Thank you Shiro-bou and Naotsugu-yan."

"I have been in your care all this while after all."

"This is nothing to worry about."

"You have been a big help, I know Shiro-bou is a good kid."

Maryele gave Shiroe a smile like a sunflower as she said this.

(Mary-nee's smile... deserves full marks. Whether I'm tired or frustrated, it is still full marks... I hope I can be the same as her.)

"I can't leave Mary-nee alone after all."

Although Shiroe thought he had done his best, his words were unable to express his feelings.

"What? Even Shiro-bou is saying this, I am finished. I am fated to be a brainless dumb woman, what should I do Henrietta?"

"Start by restraining your playful nature?"

Shiroe averted his gaze in a hurry.

"Want to touch my breasts? Do you want to?"

Maryele tried tempting Naotsugu after seeing Shiroe ignore her. Naotsugu knocked her head without a word.

"You, you hit me?"

Shiroe thought Maryele's action was a way for her to conceal her embarrassment, but Naotsugu seemed to be doing the same thing in hindsight. It was interesting to see Naotsugu stop her.

"Don't you have the ability to reflect on your actions, you panties girl!"

"Don't say panties! And what is with you Naotsugu-yan? Are my breasts so bad? Are you treating me like a grandma?"

"I don't know for sure, but you are not at grandma level yet, we should be about the same age right?"

Naotsugu whispered his birth year to Henrietta who nodded her head.

"Marie is 3 years older than you."

"So I am at the grandma level after all... an inferior product left on the shelf, that's why Naotsugu-yan is turning into a bad boy and acting rebellious against me? My poor breasts, already treated like wrinkled puddings..."

Maryele swung her legs on the couch to express her dissatisfaction.

(She is still obsessed over this in this kind of situation, Mary-nee deserves my respect in another sense.)

She had this kind of energy the first day she was stuck here, it must be Maryele's nature. Shiroe was speechless.

But Naotsugu patted her head seeing Maryele throwing a tantrum. Although it looked like someone soothing a big dog, Maryele was starting to calm down.

"It is about time to go, we have stayed quite a while... We will observe the situation outside some more."

After making his intent known to the disgruntled Maryele and Henrietta who had a serious face, Shiroe stood up.

"Yeah, we should go... sorry for intruding!"

It had been half a day since this tragedy happened, some people might have pull themselves together and battled with monsters once or twice.

Shiroe and Naotsugu bid farewell to the two still sitting on the couch.

"I apologize for my poor hospitality," said Henrietta politely, while Maryele stopped swinging her legs, stood up and looked straight at Shiroe and Naotsugu.

"Shiro-bou and Naotsugu-yan... that, it might not be the right time to say this, but would you consider for your own convenience... Would you like to join us... that is to join the Crescent Moon Alliance?"

Maryele said this hesitantly unlike her nature.

"It is nothing important. I know that you don't feel comfortable staying in a guild Shiro-bou, but in the current state of affairs. I think it would be helpful to join a guild. I think Naotsugu-yan is also not in a guild... So I want to try asking."

Her troubled expression evolved into a face that wanted to convince them.

From her voice, she didn't want to strengthen her guild by making use of Shiroe and Naotsugu, but out of her pure kindness.

"Our guild is very relaxed and won't tie you down, alright? We won't do anything that irritates Shiroe. The young ones here also challenged dungeons together with Shiroe before right? Like the underground of Shinshuku or Nakasu commercial building. I don't know why Shiroe has not joined any guild yet, but I feel that our Crescent Moon Alliance... is a comfortable place to reside in. What do both of you think...?"

Maryele was not sure how to interpret Shiroe's silence and added these words while gesturing with her hands. Her smooth green hair swaying on her white healer robes, it looked like her way of showing concern in Shiroe's eyes.

"..."

Naotsugu looked at Shiroe in silence.

These eyes were saying 'It is up to you'. To stay here or continue to roam freely, that was up to you to decide. Naotsugu expressed this to Shiroe.

Shiroe was not in middle school anymore.

Even though he still had misgivings for being used like a piece of equipment, he was able to let it go. But a feeling he was unable to describe in words was hindering Shiroe's decision.

"Sorry Mary-nee, but I can't yet."

"So that's how it is... yeah, it can't be helped then."

Maryele had an expression of regret for an instant but smiled as usual straight after. Her smile was as cheerful as a sunflower, giving Shiroe a sensation of salvation.

If they could go back to the original world, if they received the miracles of god or due to some coincidence...

If Shiroe walked past her in the streets, he was confident he would know it was Maryele.

Her healer robes, that full head of smooth hair, these were all equipment for the 3D models of Elder Tales. But Maryele's smile belonged to Maryele alone, no one else could emulate her.

It was not a smile the game engine could recreate anyway.

"Just tell us if you need anything, we will be happy to help."

"That's right, just find me if you need a reliable guardian."

"Yeah. Shiro-bou, Naotsugu-yan, thank you both. Contact me if you need anything as well."

Shiroe waved goodbye to both of them and hoped to be as strong as Maryele himself.

CHAPTER.

2

SMALL ASSASSIN

[小さな暗殺者]

▶ NAME: NAOTSUGU

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ CLASS: GUARDIAN

▶ HP: 13295

▶ MP: 6613

▶ ITEM 1:

[METEOR LOSS SHIELD]

POWERFUL SHIELD TEMPERED WITH RADIUM ORE FROM A FALLEN METEORITE. A PRODUCTION-CLASS ITEM, BUT REQUIRES COOPERATION OF SOMEONE WHO CAN SUMMON METEORS TO COMPLETE. NAOTSUGU HAS FILLED THE BACK SIDE WITH STICKERS OF PANTIES.



▶ ITEM 2:

[CASTLE KNIGHTS ARMOR]

HIGH PERFORMANCE BODY ARMOR DROPPED FROM <RUSEATO OF THE SEVENTH PRISON>. UNTIL THE ADDITION OF THE EXPANSION PACK, ITS ADEQUATE ARMOR FOR A LEVEL 90 GUARDIAN TO USE.



▶ ITEM 3:

[PANTIES NOTEBOOK]

NOTEBOOK THAT RECORDS 'PROOF' OF MONSTERS DEFEATED. ORIGINALLY IT WAS CALLED "PROOF NOTEBOOK", BUT NAOTSUGU NOTICED IT WAS POSSIBLE TO CHANGE THE NAME OF ITEMS SO HE RENAMED IT. HAS NO ACTUAL ABILITIES.





＜革靴＞
足を守り長旅を支えてくれる。
煮たら食べられる。

Part 1

... 4 days later.

It had been 4 days since they drifted ridiculously into an alternate world.

After bidding farewell to Maryele, Shiroe and Naotsugu traveled all over Akiba scavenging for information.

Naturally, there were new facts discovered every day.

The simplest thing that they understood was that they would still get hungry.

Shiroe already noticed something was wrong when they said their goodbyes with Maryele. But their feelings of nervousness and fear over their current situation overwhelmed this sensation, so they kept searching for information till their legs were numb. Night fell without Shiroe and Naotsugu recognizing the feeling of hunger.

But they lost to hunger in the end and headed to the market to purchase food just before dawn. Shiroe and Naotsugu brought their food to the abandoned building where they met earlier to enjoy their unhealthy 'supper and breakfast'... It concluded in a painful experience.

Shiroe bought roasted chicken with orange and tomato sauce, chocolate cake and green tea. Naotsugu purchased seafood pizza, mashed potato with bacon, caesar salad and orange juice.

It sounded extravagant, but both of them were level 90 players, wealthy enough to buy as many of these player crafted meals in the market as they wished. It looked like a bright, fresh, luxurious and sumptuous meal.

But the food all tasted the same.

In Naotsugu's unassuming words, they tasted like 'soggy crackers, without any salty flavor'. Shiroe had no choice but to agree with this review.

The beverages had different colors, but they all tasted like tap water.

It wasn't so disgusting that you would spit it out and it didn't seem poisonous. You felt full after eating, so it was indeed food, but it was an experience Shiroe and Naotsugu could do without.

They were not sure how to react, since it was not disgusting enough to make you curse or swear. You would sulk as you ate more of it, as if the hope in your heart was starting to fade away. It was disgusting in a pathetic way.

They confirmed something else about the variety of food they bought.

All the food they ate was crafted by players, with the NPCs selling it on their behalf.

Apart from the main classes, Elder Tales also had countless subclasses. The food was made using the cooking ability of a Chef, one of the subclasses. [\[6\]](#)

Subclasses were independent of main classes, so in Elder Tales, there could be Samurai Chefs or Sorcerer Chefs.

These Chefs could create the food Shiroe and Naotsugu ate according to their Chef level, but cooking in Elder Tales was very simple.

Stand beside a cooking facility, choose the ingredients from the game menu and input the use command. The food ingredients could be gathered from different areas. You could get meat from monsters sometimes or pick it up from dungeons. There were also seeds you could plant in fields.

Basic ingredients were sold by NPCs and could be purchased from other players in the market as well.

Anyways, you could choose from the list of food you wished to create by using the use command on the ingredients. After selecting your desired dish, you needed to wait 10 seconds before the ingredients vanished and were replaced by the finished product.

Did the problem lie with this simplified process?

This was the deduction Shiroe and Naotsugu made.

They had also confirmed the ingredients themselves had taste the previous day.

Oranges and apples were tender and juicy, freshly caught fish smelled like usual, the salt and sugar purchased from NPCs tasted salty and sweet respectively.

But the products made using these materials all tasted like 'tasteless soggy crackers'.

This process was enforced in this game world, and they couldn't do anything to change that. They could not tamper with the ingredients either. If they tried to boil them, the ingredients turned into a weird paste.

With no other choice, Shiroe and Naotsugu bought salt along with their food, sprinkling the food with salt as they ate. It was still a pitiful meal, but at least it was better than chewing wax.

Since you needed to eat, you would need to use the bathroom, which was also a necessary action, and that was confirmed rather quickly. Since they were guys, Shiroe and Naotsugu had no problems as long as they were fine with doing it outdoors.

But they did wish there was toilet paper.

Shiroe heard Naotsugu mumble 'the girls have it hard', but he pretended not to hear it.

There were many things that couldn't be helped no matter how hard Shiroe thought.

They found out they could not do without sleep.

Shiroe had great stamina, unlike in the real world. His level 90 body had high physical stats even as a magic attack class, and these numbers were reflected on his body.

But fatigue and sleepiness were two different things, and Shiroe and Naotsugu grew drowsy after moving for a period of time.

Shiroe and Naotsugu checked in once they reached the hotel, renting a zone to use as their residence. They hadn't used this function when Elder Tales was just a game, since they could just find any random alley in Akiba if they wanted to log off. They would disappear from the game world if they weren't playing. But this obvious choice for players was no longer applicable to them.

Since they were still in the game when they were sleeping, they would need a physical place to rest... And they didn't return to their original world when they woke up.

Speaking of returning to their original world, they had confirmed one other thing.

You could revive if you died in this Elder Tales world. The players who died in this world respawned in the cathedral after some time.

If the game mechanics still applied, players would lose part of their EXP and gold when they died, but Shiroe and Naotsugu hadn't experienced this yet, so they couldn't tell for sure.

Since they could revive after dying, that meant they wouldn't disappear if they died in this game world. It sounded like good news from this perspective, but this also meant that their hope of going back to their world through death was gone.

Eating and dying.

From these two essential concepts of survival, they could conclude that this was a contradictory and twisted world.

At a glance, this world seemed to be a faithful replication of Elder Tales. Shiroe and Naotsugu, who had retained their abilities and wealth from the game, were living in this game world where monsters roamed freely. But a game is a game and couldn't be replicated in an alternate world. Compared to the real world that obeyed the laws without contradiction, Shiroe felt that this world was imperfect and full of loopholes.

The best example of this was food. Grilled fish made from fish and salt didn't taste like salt or fish, just something that looked like grilled fish but tasted like soggy crackers.

But if you sprinkled salt on grilled fish, it actually had the taste of salt. Sprinkling salt made food salty, but food crafted with salt didn't have that taste.

Shiroe and Naotsugu tried grilling fresh fish with a heat source such as a campfire, but no matter what they did, it didn't become the grilled fish they were familiar with, and instead turned into a mysterious black paste.

It was the same with sleep and using the bathroom.

These were functions unnecessary for games.

But in this Elder Tales world that became reality, they could get drowsy and really need to sleep.

There was something wrong with this world, no matter how you thought about it.

Since it was a world, there should have been a set of laws. But whether it operated like Elder Tales or followed some strange physics associated with alternate worlds, they were unable to tell.

It might be a bizarre combination of both, turning this world into a chaotic mystery.

A lot of things were confirmed by the 4th day.

On the 2nd day in the alternate world.

Shiroe and Naotsugu decided to go into the field zones in Akiba. They headed to the adjacent zone that was just beside the area outside the city gate, the Archive Tower Forest.

Since it was close to the starter city of Akiba, Archive Tower Forest had low difficulty. The zones surrounding all five major cities were usually suitable for low level players to train. High level monsters lurked in zones like the deep hills that were far away from the city zone. This was common knowledge in Elder Tales.

This was a typical ruins field zone with monsters about level 20 roaming around. Similar to the abandoned buildings in Akiba, they were covered in vines and parasitic plants.

As its name suggested, Archive Tower Forest was a zone with many bookshops, libraries and a research lab that was connected to several dungeon zones. The enemies were weak, their drop items included 'Secret Level Skill Scrolls', so it was popular among novice Adventurers.

The enemy monsters were only about level 20.

Shiroe and Naotsugu were level 90 players with good equipment and vast experience, so they wouldn't gain any EXP no matter how many such monsters they defeated because of the difference in levels. They only came to the novice zone to experience battle in Elder Tales in a relatively safe environment.

The battle was not proceeding as they expected.

It wasn't because the enemies were strong. The goblins and grey wolves fell with a scratch from Naotsugu's sword. Even Shiroe who was an Enchanter with the weakest attack in the game could kill them with one shot.

That was the extent of their level difference.

But being able to defeat enemies didn't mean you would have an easy time fighting them. When Shiroe saw the grey wolves and the goblins attacking with rusty blood-splattered axes for the first time, Shiroe

was terrified and almost collapsed from his feet giving out.

His breathing rate was 10 times faster than normal. Even though he took in lots of air, he felt suffocated, which narrowed his field of vision. The enemy attacks would not harm him... If Shiroe hadn't convinced himself that this was the case, he would probably have fled by now.

And he confirmed this after some time.

The level 90 Shiroe had at least 8000 HP while Naotsugu who used the class with the strongest defense, Guardian, had over 13000 HP. The goblin's attack could only deal single digit damage.

Even if they howled fiercely and swung their axes with all their might, their blows felt painless, like the punches of a grade schooler.

Shiroe and Naotsugu cooled down after ascertaining this fact.

They didn't get hurt after regaining their composure, but the fighting remained difficult.

The laws of physics of the real world they took for granted were twisted together weirdly with the rules of Elder Tales. They could see these effects everywhere they looked.

When fighting in a party in Elder Tales like Shiroe and Naotsugu, you took note of your allies' HP through the status screen and chose the appropriate tactics and coordinated with each other almost subconsciously.

Would other enemies approach while you were fighting the enemies in front of you?

Would the enemy link up with more monsters or call for reinforcement?

Which enemy was the priority target?

Which foe could you keep at bay for now and take out later?

Various details like these were important elements that would affect the battle.

But it was hard to even confirm each other's HP in this environment. The HP values would be displayed if they focused on their forehead, but fighting in a dangerous place with debris all over while keeping track of these numbers in their mind was next to impossible.

Shiroe could still spare some time to observe the battlefield as a mage. But the Guardian Naotsugu had to engage the enemy on the front line to protect his allies and would lose the ability to grasp his surroundings, fighting almost blindly.

"This is harder than I thought."

Naotsugu sighed as he ate a meat bun for lunch. The enemies were weak so there was no need to be too concerned with HP. But this wouldn't do when fighting foes of the same level.

The food tasted like soggy crackers, even though its appearance was that of a meat bun. Shiroe and

Naotsugu reviewed the details of the battle while eating the tasteless food they had grown tired of.

The two of them had no martial arts background.

For amateurs like them, they had no idea how to handle the emotions and fear during fights, and were seriously doubtful that they could simply get used to them through live battles.

But in the back of their minds they knew they would face major problems later on if they were frightened by level 20 minions. Elder Tales was a fantasy adventure game that derived most of its entertainment from battling monsters. If this was a world affected by Elder Tales or was the world of Elder Tales itself, getting used to battle was a necessity to survive here.

Fortunately their bodies were stronger than expected.

Their high levels kept them from getting tired, and they could regain their vigor after resting a few minutes if they did get tired from traveling or battling. Shiroe and Naotsugu spent most of their days out in the field and their evenings in the pub or visiting people they knew. They conversed with players in the same boat as them and gathered any news.

Akiba appeared peaceful on the surface during these four days.

There were no major commotions like Shiroe had feared would happen.

Maybe after confirming the abundance of bland food and their ability to respawn, it allowed them to regain the most basic sense of security.

But there were still some incidences that couldn't be ignored.

Firstly, the volume of market goods on sale had dropped.

Most players had come to the same conclusion as Shiroe and withdrawn their merchandise.

The goods left for sale on the market belonged to the players who weren't logged in, but even those sold out over time.

There were rumors of major guilds cutting off supplies, and the items that were sold out were starting to gain popularity. There were many players with production subclasses, but they had stopped working in reaction to the situation.

Another effect was the recruitment campaigns of the guilds. Or the players without guilds looking for one.

Humans were creatures that found solace in numbers. Many carefree players without a guild decided to join one after experiencing this event.

You could tell which players joined which guild by checking their status through the status screen. But it was hard to find out all this information when you were inside the game.

So Shiroe could only estimate based on the ratio of the players he saw, but he did feel a sharp drop in solo players.

Shiroe and Naotsugu who were both level 90 received many invitations just walking the streets.

But the two of them declined all offers.

Ignoring Shiroe, Naotsugu had no reason to reject them. When Shiroe queried him, Naotsugu replied with a smile: "Getting to know companions is the result; not the reason. You need to move forward fearlessly and make friends through the process of battles."

The Debauchery Tea Party had not been a guild, it was just a coalition of players. For the two of them with a history in such a group, guilds were just an unimportant title.

And the two of them didn't think joining a guild provided any safety when facing such a critical and confusing incident.

But most people thought differently from Shiroe and Naotsugu and saw guilds as something they could depend on.

The twins Shiroe was accompanying the day of the incident seemed to have joined a guild as well. He only saw them on the streets in passing, but they seemed to be safe allowing Shiroe to breathe a sigh of relief.

Players without a guild wanted to join one for the feeling of security. Lots of guilds started recruiting campaigns in response to such demands. Some guilds canvassed for players without a guild, but there were other examples of several small guilds merging or famous major guilds headhunting specific players.

Shiroe didn't get why the guilds wanted to expand until Maryele explained it. It had something to do with the comfort of staying in Akiba.

After that incident, some players thought they had barged into an alternate world, which Shiroe felt was reasonable.

But the players felt much more frustrated over this ridiculous state of affairs than Shiroe had expected. These emotions gathered together in the form of a guild and formed a consensus of 'If you are not with us, you are against us'.

They could trust their guild mates but not others. This was the natural defensive reaction when living in such a hostile environment.

But this atmosphere was too strong, making friction between guilds obvious. They wouldn't be attacked since Akiba was a non-combat zone. If there were any attempts to fight, steal from or kidnap anyone, the guards would instantly appear to arrest the player in violation.

But harsh words and harassment would not be judged as combat actions. There were many ways to get around the restriction of combat actions to harass others, even more so for players trapped in this world.

Small guilds were often the victims of such harassment. Maryele tried to conceal her troubled face with a smile when talking about this.

Shiroe had found out some important information regarding zones as he was discussing this topic with Maryele. He casually opened the status screen and noticed an unfamiliar tab below the tab related to guilds.

It was unfamiliar, but he had seen it before.

This tab displayed information of the zone you were in, detailing 'Japanese server *Akiba* City area - No monsters *Battle restricted zone* Entry Restriction (None) / Exit Restriction (None)'.

Shiroe, Maryele and Naotsugu were talking in a small alley. This provided a summary of this zone and Akiba which had no problems.

The issue was the next line.

'This zone is not owned by any person or guild. Sale price is 700 million gold. Monthly maintenance fee is 1.2 million. Purchase? (Yes / No)'

... This line was displayed when you were buying small abandoned buildings, hotel rooms or guild halls like the one Crescent Moon Alliance was in.

But Akiba city was now a tradable asset, even though it required an astronomical amount of money.

Naotsugu and Maryele had thought Shiroe was joking when he pointed this out, but they were dumbstruck when they checked it out themselves.

Shiroe was a high level veteran player and was wealthier than others. Shiroe had about 50,000 gold in assets in the bank. So he was certain 700 million was not something a single player could come up with.

But if a major guild pooled all their resources... even though that was probably impossible... it was possible for them to gather this amount of cash.

Assuming someone succeeded in buying the streets of Akiba, the buyer would be able to set the entry and exit restriction here, including any people or guilds the buyer hated... they could be barred from entering this city.

The members of Crescent Moon Alliance spread out to investigate under Maryele's instruction, and they found out this purchase line was displayed in almost all the zones.

In other words, be it city, field or dungeons, all the zones were open for sale right now, the exceptions were places that already had an owner... for instance a zone like Crescent Moon Alliance's guild hall. In this situation, the owner would have another option to turn their ownership into a land deed item.

The fourth day after that incident.

The expansion campaign of the major guilds was no longer just a tactic to increase the guild's size in the eyes of Shiroe's group.

Part 2

Shiroe and Naotsugu left their hotel and headed for the market on the morning of the 5th day to buy food for the day. Naotsugu looked downcast as he dragged his feet on their way there.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I feel disheartened thinking about the nasty food we have been eating."

Shiroe could empathize with Naotsugu. Shiroe didn't think he was a gourmet and his diet in the real world was nothing to be proud of. But he realized now how good his meals were in the real world.

(The fried chicken of the fast food chain... was so tasty. Packs of ramen that costed 68 yen and yakisoba bread were great too. They were really an amazing delicacy.)

And also red tea, coffee, and sodas.

All the beverages tasted like tap water, which was really unbearable. These beverages were made with ingredients that included well water anyways.

Well water tasted like tap water too. So it tasted like tap water because of their tongues, it was all just normal water.

It was still water after adding various ingredients, which felt like a scam to them.

"... I guess we can only eat that."

"Well, you are right. But I think we can get better food even in prison. I saw it once on a TV special about Abashiri prison, the food looked nice."

"Yeah."

Now that Naotsugu mentioned it, Shiroe felt the same way.

Shiroe studied in a public school before going to high school. The lunch provided by the school might not be great cuisine, but it was much better than the soggy crackers in this world.

"I'm wondering about something."

"Wondering about what?"

"Is this a torture chamber where god forces us to eat bland food all day?"

How could that be? Shiroe thought, but it couldn't be denied after considering carefully. It might sound ridiculous, but they were in a ridiculous situation right now, so they couldn't take anything lightly as a joke.

"If that is true, this god has a good sense in torturing."

"I know, right? Forcing us to eat poisonous food that makes you puke blood is some kind of hell, right? It has the feeling of devils force feeding you."

Shiroe seemed to recall a level of hell in Buddhism which seemed to have this sort of punishment.

"But the current situation is different. This stuff should have nutritious value and no poison. The taste is bland, but you can still eat it. Just eating a meal should be fine. But there is nothing else, it will always be this taste and our morale will drop deeper and deeper... This is a high end level of harassment, right?"

"That's why I say this is a good sense of torture... But his taste in torture is irritating."

Just as Shiroe and Naotsugu were chatting leisurely about this.

Plock

A pebble fell beside his feet on the asphalt road following this sound.

Shiroe looked up and saw a three story building on the verge of collapse that used to be a shop house. At the entrance was a tall man.

"It's Akatsuki-san."

Black hair and dark clothes with fine facial features, the man did not remove the mask covering his mouth as he acknowledged Shiroe with his eyes.

"An acquaintance?"

"Yeah, this is Akatsuki-san, an Assassin."

Shiroe walked towards Akatsuki as he introduced him to Naotsugu.

Shiroe met the extremely silent Akatsuki a year ago.

He insisted on communicating through text in this age where voice chat was prevalent, but it helped to create the atmosphere of an Assassin.

There were many players who focused on role playing like Akatsuki. Shiroe saw them as players who placed emphasis on the atmosphere of the game.

When Elder Tales was just a game, Akatsuki didn't act as a 'player controlling the character Akatsuki', but as a 'resident of Elder Tales' known as Akatsuki, basing all his words and actions on this.

It was rude to call this playing pretend since this was another way to enjoy the game, so no one could criticize.

Shiroe thought Akatsuki was a competent player. Silent but didn't bother others or curry for favors, the opposite of Maryele in a sense.

He would carry out his duties perfectly in a party and didn't forget to care for his allies. Care meant more than words of encouragement, such a player was valuable in this time and age.

An important thing was the lack of awkwardness in his silence.

A quiet atmosphere could make you feel uneasy, but Shiroe felt a sense of kinship in some ways and was not uncomfortable fighting alongside him. Shiroe felt they were not totally silent, but were communicating without words.

Take their teamwork in minute supporting actions for instance.

Any small interactions during the rest between battles was a 'conversation' of care and concern.

Shiroe's impression of him was a professional Assassin when adventuring together.

"What is it Akatsuki-san?"

Akatsuki gestured with his chin and entered the run down building. It didn't appear to be a separate zone, just a backdrop in the field zone.

They entered the dimly lit ruins on Akatsuki's invitation.

"What is he like, Shiro?"

"Akatsuki-san is a role player who is very competent in the game. He's probably depressed by this situation too."

Naotsugu asked quietly and Shiroe replied in an equally soft tone.

They couldn't see Akatsuki anymore, he probably headed to the very back of the building. This seemed a bit too rushed from Akatsuki's usual demeanor.

He could smell wet sand. The morning sun shone through the gaps of the partially destroyed walls and the small windows illuminating the room.

This was indeed a shop, and was some sort of restaurant. It was a vast and chaotic space with furniture scattered all over.

Akatsuki turned around and looked at Naotsugu, part troubled and part accusatory.

"Akatsuki-san, he is Naotsugu, a Guardian and my reliable old friend that can be trusted."

"I am Naotsugu, nice to meet you! Whether you are an open pervert or a closet pervert, let's get along well!"

Shiroe introduced Naotsugu to Akatsuki after seeing his gaze.

Naotsugu greeted with his overly familiar style. Even though Shiroe thought he shouldn't talk like this to someone he just met, Akatsuki seemed too melancholic to bother with the crude Naotsugu.

(Was Akatsuki-san so tense before?)

Shiroe thought about this in the suffocating silence.

(I remember he was a quiet but flexible player who liked battling...)

"I have been looking for you."

Akatsuki said in a barely audible feminine voice after a short silence.

"You have business with me?"

He still seemed deeply troubled. He took a few deep breaths before steeling himself and said:

"I want you to sell me an Appearance Reset Potion."

Akatsuki spoke softly but the contents were audible. But the meaning behind these words took some time to register in Shiroe's mind. Shiroe took some time to think about what he meant.

'Appearance Reset Potion'.

This was a limited item that was distributed during one of the events in Elder Tales. Shiroe remembered it was a promotional event to attract more players to Elder Tales, and this was the reward item for participating. This promotional event was a combined effort with an Internet broadcast, but the content was very crude, just a mediocre voice actress doing a radio interview to promote her song. It was a failure of an event that the developers wanted to pretend never happened.

Since it was a game with 20 years of history, there were several such events that were beyond the word stupid. The variety of items limited to events was also very wide.

The characters that represented the player in the game were set at the beginning of the game.

8 races, 12 classes, name, gender, as well as height, body shape, hair style, hair and eye color could all be adjusted. Body shapes were customized using about a dozen figures like chest circumference, leg length, waist and shoulder width. Since your appearance and body shape didn't affect battle abilities, lots of players opted to use their actual appearance in the game.

'Appearance Reset Potion' allowed you to change the appearance of your character that was set just like its name suggested. As previously explained, appearance didn't affect fighting strength so this was just an item to use for fun. The item was rare since the event was a failure, but it was a good way to change the mood of the game.

At least until now.

"Aka, Aka, Akatsuki-san, could it be..."

Akatsuki glared at Shiroe.

"You are a girl?"

Akatsuki straightforwardly nodded contrary to her professional hitman look.

Her feminine voice sounded like a girl although she tried her best to conceal it. In this world where conversation with a keyboard was impossible, she was unable to hide her gender anymore.

"That is a surprise."

Naotsugu standing beside Shiroe was also stiff from the shock.

Part 3

Shiroe retrieved the 'Appearance Reset Potion' from the bank warehouse and returned to the crumbling building. Akatsuki breathed a sigh of relief as she received the orange potion.

"Please wait for a moment."

Akatsuki said before disappearing into the depths of the shop.

But she didn't go to another room. Akatsuki seemed to have left her belongings behind the screen that separated the kitchen.

(How careless, she is not living here, right?)

Shiroe thought, but this was not the mood to throw a punchline.

"Hey... Are you fine...?"

"Don't worry about... Hnng!"

"What happened?"

"This potion causes a lot of pain."

Akatsuki drank the potion immediately, he could see orange light the same color as the potion shining through the screen. Akatsuki seemed to be in agony as she replied worrying Shiroe, but his face turned white the next moment.

He could hear the sound of several disposable chopsticks snapped in half by brute force. A scream so horrible that you didn't want to know how it was made came from behind the screen.

(Wait a minute, hey!)

"Uu tsu... Gu tsu..."

Shiroe wanted to go check on her out of concern, but his legs seemed to be nailed to the ground. Listening to the moans of Akatsuki confirmed that she was a woman, definitely a young girl.

Even though her moans continued, Shiroe dared not open the screen to avoid seeing her naked.

No wonder Akatsuki didn't use voice chat.

Everyone would know she was a girl if she did, and it was an inconvenience for her to role play as an Assassin too.

Shiroe finally realized this.

"She has lots of troubles too."

Naotsugu brushed off the dust on a stool and sighed after saying that. Shiroe was surprised too.

But this was a possible scenario. With the prevalent use of voice chat in online games, players using different genders were uncommon but not unheard of.

In terms of online games, Elder Tales was a traditional and complicated game suitable for hard core players. Although there were no differences in the enjoyment of the game for either sexes, according to the articles Shiroe saw in magazines, girls preferred to play casual games.

According to Shiroe's rough gauge, the ratio of men to women in Elder Tales was 7 to 3.

Akatsuki had an in-depth understanding of the game mechanics and liked to battle, so Shiroe had never suspected she was a lady.

"It's fine now... you have my gratitude."



A young girl about 150cm in height with long flowing hair walked out from behind the screen. As he imagined from listening to her voice, she was a beautiful young lady.

Her clothing was loose since her height shrank by 30cm, she looked like a child wearing her father's work clothes. Her white ankles and slender fingers were visible from the pants and sleeves she rolled up, giving off a cute feeling like a small animal.

"Wah, she's hot, the real deal."

Naotsugu said softly with his mouth slightly open.

Shiroe felt the same.

The basic appearance and hair style in this world seemed to follow the settings of Elder Tales. But from his recent observations, the players inherited their facial features from the real world.

Shiroe was a Half-Alv in this world, a mixed race of human and the ancient Alv race, the basic body settings were skinny and strong sense of curiosity. Shiroe had confirmed through the mirror in the hotel that his facial features really reflected his real world counterpart. His wicked beady eyes stared right back at him from the mirror, making him a bit depressed.

The same theory could be applied to Akatsuki. Akatsuki was human unlike Shiroe.

Her face was definitely that of a beautiful young girl.

She had big black eyes, a white oval face and brows that looked like they were drawn with a brush. Since the face in this world reflected her real self, then she must be a pretty... No, a traditional beautiful young lady.

But Akatsuki's new body was really petite, shorter than Shiroe's shoulders, maybe not even 150cm.

Players could modify their character in detail... including the body and face of the Adventurer. The character Akatsuki created was quite tall, more than 30cm taller than the current Akatsuki.

Shiroe felt really out of place while walking with just a few centimeters in height difference, Akatsuki must have felt a dozen times worse than Shiroe did.

"It must have been hard for you."

Shiroe was stiff from shock, he didn't think Akatsuki would be such a beauty.

The one breaking this tense atmosphere was Naotsugu.

"I retract my earlier statement. You cannot be an open pervert or a closet pervert since you are not a guy. You are the one who is wearing panties, so know your place!"

He might be right, but he was really pushing it. Akatsuki didn't get what he was saying and made a perplexed expression.

"Shiroe-dono, is there something wrong with his head?"

"That's not it... There are many things wrong with him as a person."

"Why is that!?"

"In any case, he's messed up."

Akatsuki said after glancing at Naotsugu.

Maybe it's because she was finally free from the voice chat restriction.

Akatsuki was much more willing to converse with others compared to the time Shiroe met her in the game. But her quiet nature didn't change Shiroe's impression of her.

(No, I'm still unaccustomed to her cute voice.)

"You say messed up! How can I not make any dirty jokes as an upright man of society? This is my sublime obligation. But a girl like you wouldn't understand even if I explain..."

Naotsugu puffed out his chest proudly. Akatsuki gave him a look and snorted.

"But you look unwell, take this."

Naotsugu tossed a canteen full of well water over.

Since all beverages were just like normal water, Shiroe and Naotsugu gave up and bought canteens recently. They filled them up with the cheapest beverage, well water.

"Thank you for your concern."

Akatsuki looked surprised, unable to determine whether Naotsugu was a weirdo or a kind and caring person. But Akatsuki took the bottle and finished the relatively full canteen, she seemed to be really thirsty.

The three of them relaxed, settled into their most comfortable positions and chatted amongst each other in the slightly humid shop.

Akatsuki had not been eating well these past five days and had been hiding in this building to avoid others.

Shiroe didn't understand why she did this, but agreed when she gave her reasons.

Her body was dramatically different from her real self, so she felt uncomfortable just walking. She would be fine just walking leisurely on the streets, but she would be in trouble if she met any issues.

And the chance of a problem occurring was really high.

She couldn't communicate with text messages in this world, so she would need to speak, be it shopping or

contacting her acquaintances. She could still use pen and paper to converse, but that would just make her look suspicious.

There was no penalty if she talked, she would just be a man with a girly voice. But an imposing tall assassin talking with a female voice was out of place and would definitely attract the attention of others along with trouble. Akatsuki's deduction was probably right.

"I recalled Shiroe-dono mentioned that you had an Appearance Reset Potion when we partied together, if I had this... I should be able to break free from my predicament."

"I see."

Naotsugu continued.

"I guess you should have played the game using this shrimp-like body in the first place."

"Don't call me a shrimp."

She glared sharply at Naotsugu.

Akatsuki had strong eyes. She was like this before drinking the potion, but after reverting to her original body, Shiroe felt her eyes were full of determination and imposing spirit strong enough to drill through boulders.

"Isn't a shrimp just a shrimp?"

"Messed up people have no right to say that."

Naotsugu ignored her glare and continued to tease her.

But apart from teasing, Naotsugu also took out food and drinks from his bag for Akatsuki. His casual way of showing his kindness really fitted Naotsugu's way of doing things. Akatsuki also understood this and stopped brooding over this topic. She was just uncomfortable since this was the first time she met someone like Naotsugu.

"Games are fun because you can do things you couldn't in real life, right? It's the same for fantasy or science fiction worlds. Changing my height was one such leisure of mine."

Akatsuki pouted and answered a bit begrudgingly.

She did have a point.

"Ah you are right, that can't be helped."

Naotsugu said sympathetically and peeked at Akatsuki.

"..."

"Yeah, this can't be helped, it is not Akatsuki's fault. I am with Akatsuki, everyone has the right to dream."

Naotsugu gave a thumbs-up with a smile as if he understood everything. Akatsuki jumped and kneed Naotsugu in the face the very next moment.

"Don't use your knee! Your knee!"

"Shiroe-dono, is it alright if I knee this strange man in the face?"

"Ask before you do it!"

Shiroe laughed happily at their interaction.

And the two of them were not really on bad terms which made it funnier.

Naotsugu complained 'he just wanted her to be a good kid', Akatsuki requested 'please deal with this weirdo'. After laughing for a while, Shiroe restrained his snickers and asked Akatsuki:

"Do you feel better after reverting to your original body?"

Akatsuki considered the question for a moment and replied with a serious expression.

"The body of a man is cool and the attack distance is long... But I am deeply troubled."

"Is it? What trouble?"

Naotsugu asked.

They just met, but they were already acting like old friends. Shiroe recalled that Akatsuki was the type that was cautious in personal relationships, but maybe she let down her guard because of Naotsugu's nature.

"That... going to the bathroom is troubling."

Akatsuki looked at the floor and answered vaguely.

(It will be sexual harassment if you carry on, Naotsugu!)

"Ah, so you had a penis then!"

(Don't add insult to injury, Naotsugu!)

"Ah, that, let's talk about something else! Did you adjust your character to be closer to your real size?"

Shiroe changed the topic awkwardly to aid the hapless and blushing Akatsuki by raising this question. She was short for a female.

"Yeah, correct."

Akatsuki adjusted her baggy clothes and answered with a serious expression.

(She is acting this way to conceal her embarrassment after hearing Naotsugu's sexually harassing

words...)

But Shiroe felt this girl was more serious in her ways than normal and would tend to stare straight at the person or thing she was looking at.

Akatsuki had a habit of staring at things without ever averting her gaze, which was probably how she acted in the real world.

It gave off the impression this petite girl would always do her best at whatever task she took on.

"With the height issue resolved, walking should be easier now right?"

"I am grateful for your help."

Akatsuki thanked him curtly.

Her surly manner of speaking, abrupt actions, and habit of staring.

This combination overlapped with the silent and professional warrior Shiroe knew. Although their appearance differed, a sincere and serious demeanor seemed like Akatsuki's nature.

Shiroe felt the petite young girl in front of him was slowly merging with the 'Akatsuki' he knew.

"How much do I owe you? Can I pay with my entire fortune?"

Akatsuki stared as usual at Shiroe with her focused eyes and said these shocking words.

"I only have about 30,000... Forgive my lack of funds."

"No need, don't worry about this."

"That won't do. That potion was an event limited item, a rare treasure that cannot be found again. It must be priceless, 30,000 shouldn't be enough."

That was right in theory.

Even though it was just gathering dust in the warehouse, but it wouldn't be surprising to charge a big premium on it now.

"..."

"..."

But was this really an item worth a fortune? Shiroe doubted it. It was a useless item until now anyway.

"That, ah... can you just treat it as a free gift?"

"I don't want anyone saying I wouldn't repay a favor."

From Shiroe's perspective, this pair of pleading and glaring eyes were making him uncomfortable.

Akatsuki was a beautiful young girl, so her looks had strong destructive powers.

"If you are so concerned, just use your panties... Fu wah!"

Akatsuki once again elegantly kneed Naotsugu in the face. The angle was just right, even though Naotsugu was sitting down on a pile of debris this time.

"Akatsuki-san has good reflexes."

"Hold on, hey, closet pervert, whose side are you on!"

"Shiroe-dono, is it all right if I knee this strange man in the face?"

"Didn't I say to ask before you do it!?"

Akatsuki's action of pointing at Naotsugu and asking for permission was cute and mischievous, Shiroe couldn't help smiling at that.

"Eh, forget it. Let's not talk about the price of the potion for now. Hey, Akatsuki."

"Don't forget to use honorifics."

"These trivial things don't matter, shrimp."

"Don't call me shrimp. And this is an important matter, if I accept Shiroe-dono's limited items without repaying him, I will be shamed forever."

Akatsuki refused to budge.

Naotsugu looked at the pouting Akatsuki and turned to Shiroe, shifting his gaze between them and said:

"No, the things you are talking about are unimportant. Anyhow, why don't you stay with us for a while, Akatsuki?"

"... Ah?"

This seemed to surprise Akatsuki.

She seemed to freeze for a moment.

"Tactician, explain."

Naotsugu said his piece and dumped the rest on Shiroe as though it was Shiroe's duty.

He said something that was not discussed ahead of time... Although Shiroe thought this way, he still agreed with Naotsugu's proposal.

"... Yeah, I think this is a good idea."

But thinking 'this idea is good' was not equal to 'this idea is easy to explain'. Naotsugu said this out of

good will, but it felt like a penalty game forcing Shiroe to hit on a girl, making Shiroe feel embarrassed.

"... I don't want to say this, but Miss Akatsuki is a petite girl and after reverting back to your original body, that... ah, your appearance and voice might... get you into issues easily. The important thing is Miss Akatsuki is not in a guild. Do you have any plans to join one?"

"I am not used to guilds since Assassins are lone wolves."

Shiroe's words made Akatsuki frown.

"I thought so. We are both free Adventurers, freedom panties festival."

"... Shut up, pervert."

"If you have plans to join a guild, then it's fine... But people will bother you if you are not in one, right? The big guilds want to increase their battle powers, so they will invite anyone they see. They will put in even more effort to scout if it is a female player."

"Is that so...?"

"To secure a base and exchange information... I think it will be good to have some connections."

Akatsuki nodded in agreement.

(Akatsuki-san is not good with socializing with others.)

Shiroe didn't think of himself as a very sociable person, but Akatsuki had a cold atmosphere around her. When Elder Tales was still a game, Akatsuki showed her kindness through wordless actions. Although Akatsuki was quiet, she didn't really hate being with others, but very few players realized that.

From what Shiroe knew, the combat specialist Akatsuki knew very few people, and he was the one she worked with most often.

Dealing with things this way in a game was fine. Since it was just a game, it was okay to enjoy it any way you wanted if it didn't bother others.

But this world was no longer a game.

Since Akatsuki was such a beauty, her nonchalant attitude could spark off some serious problems.

(I am not sure how deep Naotsugu thought about this... in a sense, being in a team together is a good thing, but...)

"Isn't this great? Assassins are great at taking out people, right? While we are engaging the monsters, she can sneak behind them and deliver a killing blow, a beautiful combo dealing out justice to the bad guys' festival!"

Naotsugu said with a grin.

(This is correct in terms of teamwork... But what is this festival thing he keeps mentioning?)

"Eh, would you mind Shiroe-dono?"

"We'd be happy to have you. No matter what obstacles we face, it will be safer with the 3 of us working together."

"I see, then as a shinobi. I shall revere Shiroe-dono as my lord."

Shiroe's words made Akatsuki hesitate a while, but she nodded, looking with her unique piercing eyes that seem to be forever focused.

(Shinobi? Lord? Isn't Akatsuki an Assassin?)

Although he had some doubts, it still sounded like a good idea to Shiroe.

"My lord has saved me from the dire fate of being transformed into a man, thus I must work to repay you. This is what requiting a debt means, as your shinobi I will protect you from now on."

Akatsuki said these words with shifty eyes that were not like her. Naotsugu was not bothered by the bruises on his nose and grinned widely at Shiroe.

"So that settles it, we are a team now. Welcome to the party, shrimp."

"Shut up, idiot."

"We are a unique three-men team, please treat me well."

The trio hit each other's canteens in the messy shop house, toasting the formation of their team.

Part 4

A few days after Akatsuki joined the team.

Their area of operations gradually shifted to the field zone near Akiba.

There were several reasons for doing this, one of them was the difficulty level of the battles they faced in Archives Tower Forest.

The basic structure and tactics of battles followed that of Elder Tales faithfully. But there were major difference in terms of fighting techniques and skills.

Elements that were not important when playing the game... Like the angle you swung the sword or raised your shield, the terrain around your feet, how to get into position, there were now many more details to consider when fighting. Teamwork and field of vision were also major concerns, and most importantly the mental obstacle of fear was hard to break through.

Shiroe's first thought when practicing outside with Naotsugu was 'this is going to be hard'. But after going through several field trips, his view changed into 'this is harder than I imagined'.

Since Akatsuki was a frontline melee class, it would be better for her to get used to this early. They were in a party for now, but they didn't know how long this alliance would last, so all of them agreed that they should get used to the basics of fighting during their time together.

Another thing was the existence of the Crescent Moon Alliance.

After their initial visit, they dropped by the guild quite often to exchange information.

Unlike Shiroe's party, Crescent Moon Alliance had some production players. Although Shiroe had a production subclass as a high-level Scribe, Crescent Moon Alliance had a greater variety of craftsmen.

They knew more people in the city and had better efficiency in collecting information than Shiroe's group.

Since they were trading information, it would be better to investigate the field zones and train at the same time. This was the other reason.

To ensure their minimum level of safety, there were also other people in Akiba who were taking action like Shiroe's group. But most of the people in Akiba were just spending their days idling around, unable to accept this new reality even after a week had passed. There might be someone... Maybe god or game masters who would save them? The players held on to this hope.

(If they do not hang on to this hope, their hearts might just crumble.)

Shiroe could empathize with them, he was just not optimistic enough to believe in this hope.

If this was just a prank and help did arrive, that would be great and Shiroe would be relieved. His life in college may not be that wonderful, but it was the world he was familiar with and grew up in, he definitely wanted to return.

Even if this was an event orchestrated by the officials, it was an undeniable fact that they could be trapped here forever. Someone who was extremely cautious would not bet on the possibility of rescue and live his days so fruitlessly.

Akiba was the biggest server in Japan and the starting city for new players. The major cities might differ slightly, but the zones surrounding them only had low-level monsters, a safe area suitable for beginners to explore.

Shiroe's decided to investigate each of these zones and gradually work their way to high level areas. If you just considered their level, Shiroe, Naotsugu and Akatsuki were all level 90.

Even if they took hits in the low-level zones, they would not suffer much damage. The enemies would not attack recklessly once they understood how powerful Shiroe's group was.

In this sense, it was possible to avoid battles. But Shiroe's group wanted to fight all kinds of monsters whenever possible.

The enemies' attacks were not damaging, but they would still involuntarily flinch when facing the strikes of various monsters. Their harsh breathing, suffocating stench of blood and malicious intent definitely couldn't be felt through your computer screen.

Even if they were low-level monsters, the fear of battle was enough to make Shiroe's group back away.

They were low-level foes that wouldn't yield any EXP, but Shiroe's party still fought those several times to study ways to handle fighting and to get used to the feel of the battles.

Their battle formation usually had Naotsugu take the lead.

When Naotsugu charged within striking distance of the enemies, it signalled the beginning of the fight.

The Guardian Naotsugu used his heavy armor and shield techniques to fend off the monster's attack. 'Taunting Shout' was one of the basic skills of Guardians with the effect of enraging the enemies. The taunted monsters would then focus on Naotsugu, keeping Shiroe and Akatsuki safe from attacks.

As they expected, it was hard to check the status screen when fighting fiercely on the front lines. When Elder Tales was just a game, you just needed to select a monster to attack and your character would keep attacking it. The character would also evade the enemy's blows with a fixed rate, there was no need to worry about parrying the attack with your sword or blocking with your shield.

You just needed to click the skill button to activate it.

But you needed to keep your eyes on the movements of enemy in front of you when fighting in this alternate world and keep attacking with your weapon repeatedly.

Your vision would narrow when facing the approaching monsters and you wouldn't be able to see the movements of all the enemies.

Shiroe's group designed several formations and battle codes after several discussions. Their conclusion was to let Shiroe who was away from the front line to monitor the whole battlefield and give instructions, which was the safest bet.

Shiroe needed to support with magic while keeping abreast of the surrounding situations and his allies' status.

Most of the Enchanter's spell were mediocre. Keen Edge was one of the few spells Enchanters could cast that was very helpful. It increased an allies' weapon attack by 30% for a few hours, there was no need to recast it during battles.

There were other spells that could be used, but their usage was largely dependent on the situation. Shiroe's main duty was to watch the surroundings and manage his allies' status.

Akatsuki had grown familiar to Shiroe and Naotsugu as teammates after many practice sessions.

Assassins were one of the three weapon attack classes and had the highest attack power among the twelve classes.

They differed from the warrior classes which were proficient in intercepting the enemies' attack on the front line. Contrary to that, weapon attack classes did not have their toughness in defense or the skills to lure enemies.

Simply put, the duty of weapon attack classes was to finish off the enemies lured in by the warrior classes. Among the three, Assassins specialized in killing off enemies speedily. The 'Assassination' skill used by Assassins could deal almost 10,000 damage in an instant.

Akatsuki dashed agilely through the battlefield.

Her petite body had amazing speed, you would have trouble tracking her movements as she rushed towards the enemies. This was 'Hide Walk', a skill of the Assassins allowing them to traverse to their opponents' blind spot and increasing the success rate of the next attack.

Her running figure with her black hair flowing behind her was as smooth as a liquid, so beautiful it was mesmerizing.

Naotsugu blocked the fangs of the enemy with his shield and jumped back with the flow, Akatsuki would swing her blade with haste striking their flanks to stop further attacks on Naotsugu.

The cooperation of the front and rear guards was a tactic that oversaw the whole battlefield; the teamwork of 2 vanguards was directly related to the fight itself.

This was why there was a need to repeatedly fight enemies, so they would know each other's *modus operandi* by instinct.

Shiroe on the other hand was in charge of confirming their status, re-positioning them to keep the enemies

off balance. He would occasionally cast Enchanter spells to trick or limit the movements of the enemies, moving the battle to their advantage.

After a week of practice, Shiroe's team was able to handle level 50 enemies.

CHAPTER.

BATTLE OF ROKA

[ロカの遭遇戦]

▶ NAME: AKATSUKI

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ CLASS: ASSASSIN

▶ HP: 9873

▶ MP: 9771

▶ ITEM 1:

[NON-VITREOUS
TENMOKU DAGGER]

A CERAMIC DAGGER WITH A BEAUTIFUL PATTERN RUNNING DOWN ITS BLACK BLADE. THE BLACK GLAZE PREVENTS REFLECTION OF LIGHT, IMPROVING ITS CONCEALMENT PROPERTIES. A PRODUCTION-CLASS ITEM BY SOMEONE WITH REFINED TASTES.



▶ ITEM 2:

[BLACK CLOTHES OF
EVERLASTING DARKNESS]

SHINOBU CLOTHING TINTED LIKE IT WILL MELT INTO DARKNESS. HAS THE MAGICAL POWER TO INCREASE THE WEARERS ABILITIES IN DARKNESS. A COMMON STRATEGY IS TO COMBINE DARKNESS MAGICS AND NIGHT-VISION EQUIPMENT.



▶ ITEM 3:

[HELIOTROPE HAIRPIN]

ORNAMENT THAT INCREASES MAGIC DEFENSE AND LUCK. CAN BE USED TO INCREASE HATE OF ALL MONSTERS WITHIN RANGE IN EXCHANGE FOR ITS DESTRUCTION. IN THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS, HELIOTROPE STANDS FOR "LOYALTY, DEVOTED LOVE".





〈ホーション〉
水薬。無いと心細いが、
準備していかないと使わない。

Part 1

"We looted a lot this round, we're making a killing out here!"

Naotsugu swung his skinning knife to shake off the blood before sheathing it. Shiroe nodded in agreement as he put down his staff to cancel the spells he had prepared.

(I'm feeling melancholic again after recollecting various things.)

Shiroe shrugged with a sigh. This was really a headache. There were so many things troubling him since arriving in this world that he forgot what he was brooding about sometimes.

(I hope this doesn't become my catch phrase.)

"What is it, my lord?"

Akatsuki had finished packing and was by Shiroe's side before he knew it. Shiroe was unable to calm his emotions in front of her shiny black eyes akin to obsidian that looked at him from a low angle.

"Let's go back." Shiroe said with a smile to change the topic.

Shiroe's group was in a place called 'Small Stone Herb Garden', a relatively small field zone about 1 square km in size.

It was already evening, the wind was starting to turn chilly, and the sound of birds chirping was all around them.

This zone was close to both Akiba and Shibuya, a place suitable for one-day training trips. The monster level was a bit high for a place so near the city.

"Let's hurry back then."

"Roger."

After listening to Shiroe, the girl in black, Akatsuki replied seriously without emotion as usual as she fastened her pack.

The defeated corpses of triffids and briar weasels laid all around them, and would disappear in a shower of light particles after some time.

Triffids were a type of mobile plant with a flower bud the size of rugby ball on top of it. The bud would peel back in 3 parts, revealing the sharp teeth inside, a horrifying creature.

A briar weasel on the other hand let vines grow on its body. It was faster than a cat and could attack with its vine, an agile monster.

The levels of the monsters were 48 and 52 respectively.

Their levels were quite high in the world of Elder Tales, but they were 40 levels below Shiroe's team, so they wouldn't gain any EXP from them.

After days of training, Shiroe's party suspected this world faithfully followed the settings of Elder Tales. They had not confirmed this yet, but they probably needed to defeat monsters at least 5 levels below them, or in other words enemies level 85 and above for them to gain EXP.

It would be a very tough fight if they took on level 85 monsters now. They might be able to handle one, but not if they were attacked by a group.

"You doing fine?"

"I took some potions, so I'm good. My defense is like an iron wall, iron festival!"

Naotsugu responded with a grin while knocking on his armor. His grey gauntlets made a clear dull sound as they hit his breastplate.

According to Naotsugu, you felt less pain from enemy attacks than in real life. You didn't feel half dead even when your health bar was halved and only felt a bit sore and warm from the wounds all over your body.

Naotsugu described the worst pain as stubbing your toe on the corner of a cabinet.

(That would be painful enough to make me cry three times.)

Shiroe frowned at his description, but Naotsugu continued laughing heartily.

(Even if it is this way for now, there is no telling if it will remain like this.)

Shiroe remained on guard as he thought.

(The low-level enemies have weak attacks, so there is no rush to make snap judgments or ensuring a retreat path. But we will take more damage as the monster level increases... Even an excellent Guardian like Naotsugu won't be able to handle it as easily as he does now. We need to think of other possibilities...)

Among the 12 classes, the one with the highest HP and defense combination on the frontline was the Guardian. If there were attacks Naotsugu couldn't withstand, it would be impossible for any other class to do so.

(We will need a healer after all... But I don't want to increase the number of teammates if we take efficiency into consideration. I doubt our teamwork would be good if we invited anyone with such motives. We will just be sent back to town if we do get wiped out, but...)

The miracle of revival existed in this world.

Even if they died in battle, they would respawn in the cathedral, Shiroe's group knew this.

But they still refrained from pushing themselves too hard even with their revival guaranteed. Death was still an unacceptable taboo for them.

(Being able to come back to life after we die is really suspicious.)

"My lord...?"

"Hey Shiro, hurry up!"

After acting together for several days, they had made greater progress in both personal relations and teamwork than Shiroe had expected. The members of this team had fitted really well to this new dynamic despite their history of working alone.

As they got used to life as a group, their individual characteristics were magnified too. In this team roster, Shiroe naturally became the guy who was responsible for worrying about things.

(I have been playing the part of tactician since my Tea Party days anyway.)

Shiroe got lost in his thoughts easily.

He had also noticed this bad habit, but it was not something you could change that easily even if you knew about it.

(It's okay to be the guy responsible for worrying, but I don't want to be the guy who spoils the mood,) Shiroe thought.

"Let's withdraw then... Do you need me to shine a light?"

Shiroe asked as he prepared his Magic Light spell.

"Lord Shiro, please wait."

"There is no need to address me as lord. We are comrades, can't you just call me Shiroe?"

"Then please address me as Akatsuki, too."

Akatsuki stared at Shiroe as she spoke after brushing aside Shiroe's request.

(How should I describe Akatsuki's gaze, hmmm...)

Akatsuki was a beautiful young lady no matter how you looked at her.

And because of that, Shiroe found it hard to withstand Akatsuki's gaze. He didn't hate it, but it made Shiroe uncomfortable.

Shiroe was a typical homely online gamer who was bad at socializing with others. He didn't have much experience dealing with girls.

(No matter what excuse I use, the bottom line is... I am shy and I don't know how to react... this is

something that can't be helped, right? Yes, I understand, I really do...)

"My lord."

Akatsuki said as she took a step forward, akin to kicking a man while he was down. Akatsuki had to look up at him due to the height difference, which made Shiroe feel a little sorry.

"Erm... what is it? What's so funny, Naotsugu?"

Naotsugu was looking at Shiroe and Akatsuki with a smile on his face. After snapping at Naotsugu, he asked Akatsuki to continue.

"I will be scouting ahead on our way back."

"Why?"

"Practice. Assassins have Dark Vision, Sneak, and Silent Move, I want to see how it feels using them in this world. This forest is the perfect place to practice."

Akatsuki looked at the dark areas of the forest as she fastened her sword with her black waist cloth, making her preparations as she informed them of her intention.

Moving alone.

Shiroe gave his permission after considering for a while.

This zone didn't seem to have monsters stronger than the 2 types they fought. Akatsuki should be able to take on any single monster or run away if there were too many enemies.

Akatsuki wanted to confirm her skills so she would be ready when she needed to use them. Shiroe understood her concerns, knowing the limits of your abilities was crucial to surviving in this world.

"Be careful. Let's meet by the south gate. We'll stay illuminated using Magic Light as we go, you can use that to find us."

"I understand. I can find you if we are in the same zone."

If you formed a party and were in the same zone, you could find your allies through the direction and distance displayed on your screen. It shouldn't take long for them to meet.

"See you later then, shrimp Akatsuki."

"Be quiet, stupid Naotsugu."

Akatsuki retorted and was gone the next instance as if she had merged with the forest.

"That shrimp is good."

"I couldn't even hear the leaves rustle."

Naotsugu whistled.

Shiroe shrugged and chanted the spell for Magic Light and the tip of his staff glowed like a lamp. In the dimly lit forest illuminated by the fading orange light of the evening sun, the magic light gave off a gentle and soothing light.

"Let's be on our way."

"OK tactician, let's march towards our goal of panties!"

Shiroe and Naotsugu headed for the east gate under the illumination of the light.

Step by step.

The trail was full of grass that looked like ribbons with dew and pebbles covered in moss. Shiroe and Naotsugu walked on this path advancing through the Imperial Forest.

(This is like walking in Yakushima Island or the Amazon Rainforest that I saw on web-TV... Even if the others say this is an alternate world, I still find it hard to believe.)

They could faintly hear the pleasant sounds of insects.

The duo waded through the undergrowth. They had to rely on Naotsugu's sword to bash a way through as they moved through the forest in the night.

"So Akatsuki's subclass is Tracker."

Naotsugu's words reminded Shiroe of the earlier conversation.

The Sneak and Silent Move skills that Akatsuki mentioned were Tracker skills. Tracker was one of the many subclasses in Elder Tales, letting you learn skills to track or avoid being tracked in turn.

A feature common to all subclasses in Elder Tales was the provision of skills that were not directly related to combat. Subclasses were also independent from the 12 main classes that were battle focused, so you could learn any subclass if you met the requirements.

There were two main types of subclasses.

One type was production subclasses like Chef, Tailor, Blacksmith, and Carpenters. Players with such subclasses could craft all sorts of items using the appropriate ingredients and facilities.

It was easy to learn a production subclass, you just needed to buy an instruction manual from NPCs, and you could start accumulating EXP. The EXP for a subclass was separate from battle EXP, so it was tedious to level it up. But it didn't require any special quest or items, anyone could grind it to high levels if you were determined enough, and you didn't need your comrades' help to do this.

Shiroe was a Scribe, which was also a production subclass. He could duplicate magic tomes, maps, and

all sorts of documents using paper and ink.

Being Nobles, Merchants, and Rose Garden Princesses belonged to the other type, which was the role-playing subclasses. Unlike production subclasses, they couldn't craft items, but they could learn some special skills and rare techniques. They could also get rare equipment in some situations.

Tracker was a role-playing subclass, it had the ability to track other players or foes, erase their presence, and move in the dark.

Shiroe wasn't very familiar with the Tracker subclass. The 12 main classes that dictated combat were designed by the creators of Elder Tales, a large American corporation. The strength of each class would be balanced for each update and more subclasses would be added. The outsourced company in each country, such as Fuji Entertainment in Japan, may create a subclass unique to its server.

Shiroe remembered about 50 subclasses from memory, but with exclusive subclasses created in other servers, it was hard to guess their number.

Powerful subclasses were popular and famous, so Shiroe knew about them and had a rough idea of their features. But even a veteran player like Shiroe wouldn't know about some obscure subclasses.

Out of the countless subclasses, Trackers were sort of well-known.

It had useful abilities, but it wasn't something a player would need often so it was in the middle in terms of popularity. Players not as hardcore as Shiroe might not have heard of it, but it was more famous than Sailors or Janitors.

"She is really dedicated to her role-playing."

Naotsugu grinned to express his agreement.

(A Tracker Assassin, she is obsessed with ninjas. I can see why she would call herself one.)

Akatsuki's style of giving her all made Shiroe and Naotsugu smile. Role-playing always gave the impression of playing pretend, but Akatsuki's serious approach to it made the act feel real.

"What do you think of our shrimp girl, Shiro?"

"... Very active on the front lines with a high level of focus."

Shiroe replied to Naotsugu's vague question after a moment of consideration.

Naotsugu was asking Shiroe for his opinion on Akatsuki.

Shiroe had a good impression of Akatsuki, but he was acting indifferent because he felt embarrassed about praising her.

"Enough about me, what about you, Naotsugu? Has your burden increased?"

"The burden has decreased. Compared to just the two of us, we're clearing the monsters way faster. Some

minions are dealt with before I can even turn to face them. She may be a shrimp, but she's a strong shrimp."

Naotsugu replied to Shiroe as he led the way.

Naotsugu was kind and cheerful, the type that was very sociable. He made crude jokes sometimes, but Shiroe felt he did this intentionally to ease the mood.

But Naotsugu wouldn't mince his words when talking about battles. He might be polite about it, but he would not lie.

From what Shiroe remembered about Naotsugu's criticisms of other players, he gave almost full marks to Akatsuki.

"But she mentioned her reach was shorter and her attacks had less weight after she adjusted her appearance, right?"

"I was never a shrimp, so I wouldn't know about her reach, but with her speed and agility, that shouldn't be important, correct? Why don't you try taking a knee in the face from her? It is really instantaneous, my eyes can't keep up even if I want to block it."

"I would rather not."

Naotsugu rubbed his nose as he recalled the pain and said:

"As to her attack dropping because of her weight, it should be true since she said so herself, huh? According to the settings, your attack is not affected by gender, and having more weight in your punches may not increase your attack power. But this is just what she felt, so there is no other way to tell. If her attack power really has decreased, then she will be fine with Shiroe's support spells backing her up."

Naotsugu said as he pried away a leaf with thorns.

(About that... He is right.)

Shiroe was an Enchanter, one of the 3 magic attack classes. Each of the warrior, weapon attack, healer and magic attack categories had 3 classes each forming a total of 12 classes. The Enchanter was one of these twelve.

Among the magic attack classes, Enchanter was the best at support, setting up the battle stage and using crowd control. It had a variety of support spells.

Keen Edge was one such support spell that increased weapon attacks.

Every time an ally hit the enemy, Thorn Bind Hostage could deal additional damage with its curse vines.

Attacking the psyche of the enemy to numb its senses with Mind Shock.

Enchanter was a special class that contributed to victory by boosting its allies' power and controlling the flow of battle.

"Yeah... You're right," Shiroe replied shyly.

Enchanter was the least popular class in Elder Tales and had a bad reputation among players.

Shiroe had no obligation towards anyone and chose this class out of personal preference. No matter what others said, he was confident of the Enchanter's abilities and its deep potential. Shiroe also knew that an Enchanter could not work alone.

This class needed a party, and the effectiveness of an Enchanter widely depended on how good their teamwork was.

This had nothing to do with the stats of the player; how well you worked with others could not be measured numerically.

Because Shiroe understood this, he felt embarrassed when others told him 'That will be fine' or 'Things will work out if we do it together'.

For Enchanters...

If their existence in the team was acknowledged, it meant the player's character and personal relationships were working well.

"Shiro..."

"Yeah?"

"I think you're holding back too much sometimes."

"Hmm?"

Naotsugu said as he bashed through the vegetation. This change in topic was too big and Shiroe was unable to keep up.

"... For example panties?"

"How did this turn into a question?"

"The mysterious triangle region of cute girls is always questioning the world, you should understand that, you locked closet pervert!"

"How perverted am I in this setting of yours?"

Shiroe at this moment was unable to understand Naotsugu's concern, and could only chase after his back.

The Shiroe right now was just a normal Enchanter.

Part 2

They moved to a neighboring zone after linking up with Akatsuki.

"Let's hurry, I miss our hotel."

Although he was tired from the battles, Naotsugu was in a cheerful mood as he chatted with his teammates.

This region was known as the Kanda Channel, a ruin based on the Marunouchi Metro in the real world. It was the nest of demihumans like goblins and beast men now.

The enemies in this region were only about level 30, no longer a threat to Shiroe and the others. With such a level gap, the monsters would hesitate to attack them.

With the sky totally dark, Shiroe, Naotsugu, and Akatsuki regretted spending too much time in the Imperial Forest.

Since monsters wouldn't attack them recklessly, they could just make camp in some ruins, caves, or under trees. But they were still traveling with their magic light shining, moving on the roads with abandoned cars and trucks scattered all around.

Akatsuki insisted that sleeping on a proper bed was more comfortable.

They had furs and fangs looted from monsters in their bag they needed to trade for cash anyway, so they needed to go back to the city.

Naotsugu who was in the lead would turn back every now and then to confirm his party mates' statuses.

(Both of them show no signs of fatigue, our level 90 bodies have considerable stamina after all.)

Naotsugu sighed in relief secretly after looking at their steadfast footsteps.

Unlike the two of them, Naotsugu was a typical warrior. Warriors had outstanding strength, stamina, and agility.

Even Naotsugu was surprised he could fight for hours wearing 40-50 kg armor.

Even if he exhausted his energy, he just needed to rest for a few minutes to slowly recover his strength. He was confident of lifting 300kg in terms of his explosive power, and his stamina seemed boundless.

But it was different for the others. Shiroe was a pure intellect class, Akatsuki was incredibly fast, but she was a lightly armored fighter. They might have claimed 'there is no problem with stamina, we are level 90 too' but Naotsugu felt he needed to accommodate them for this part.

But there was no need to worry for tonight.

With the bright moonlight and magic illumination, the relatively smooth asphalt road with some debris and a few potholes was easy to traverse.

"The goblins aren't attacking us."

"We are level 90, of course they aren't."

"I like the goblin with the skull on its head. Their arrogant demeanor is cute and weird."

(Akatsuki is talking nonsense with a straight face...)

Akatsuki should be referring to goblin shamans. They led their kinsmen minions with their ice and fire spells. They might look funny when they arrogantly gave commands, but they were definitely not cute.

"You like those type of monsters, shrimp?"

Naotsugu asked again to be certain. Akatsuki replied curtly:

"They are cute and die so easily."

They needed to be killed since they were enemies, but Naotsugu couldn't understand what was so cute about them.

"Most magic type monsters look arrogant, but their armor is as thin as paper, and their HP is extremely low. It would be fine if they stayed at the back, but goblin shamans will walk nonchalantly to the front lines and are easy to take down. I just need to use Hide Shadow to sneak up beside them, and I can slit their throat with my blade. The way their body collapses like a puppet with its strings cut is so addictive."

As she was not sure how to interpret Naotsugu's query, she shared her thoughts with the others casually.

(... Wah, if you put it like that, wouldn't Shiro be troubled?)

Shifting his gaze to the side, Naotsugu could see that Shiroe was shocked to hear that. It was natural for mages to have low defenses, so Shiroe didn't need to be so sad. Naotsugu also knew Akatsuki doesn't mean to hurt Shiroe.

But even so, Shiroe still looked depressed with Akatsuki acting so casually matter-of-fact.

Naotsugu wanted to sigh looking at the two of them.

(Shiro is smart, but he tends to overthink things and is too concerned with trivial matters... He is shouldering a large burden. Why is our tactician frightened to this extent?)

Naotsugu thought Shiroe was holding back too much.

If someone asked him what Shiroe was holding back about, Naotsugu wouldn't be able to answer. This was just how he felt.

Naotsugu felt the same way back when the two of them were in the Debauchery Tea Party. Shiroe wanted to do things by himself too much, which Naotsugu thought was Shiroe's good point.

But the duty of a Guardian was to protect his allies.

It left a bitter taste in his mouth if his teammates didn't rely on him, as if his duty had been stripped from him. Naotsugu thought Shiroe should at least rely on Naotsugu for things he was good at.

"Hold on, our mage is reliable during critical junctures, right?"

"Hmm? The armor of my lord is as thin as paper too... That's fine, I will protect him as his ninja."

She didn't notice his depression as she kicked Shiroe again while he was down. Naotsugu thought they were interacting like children... But Naotsugu was thinking the same about Shiroe too.

On the whole, it was a quiet night as they chatted on their way back.

They could see the elongated shadows of the goblins sneaking around in the moonlight. But when Naotsugu looked at them, they would scatter.

"This is a zone adjacent to Akiba with only low-level monsters lurking around. If there were high-level monsters, the beginners would be wiped out."

Shiroe said.

It had been more than 10 days since they were trapped in this world, and no new players had shown up since.

What was his body doing in the real world? Did all the players disappear? Or were they all in a coma? Naotsugu and the others had no way to tell.

(It may be hard to imagine, but our real selves may each still be living their lives as normal. That means we have no way of going back, an abandoned babies sales festival. If it is like some light novel setting where the world forgets we ever existed at all, it would be depressing too...)

Contrary to the way he acted, Naotsugu was thinking about this as a fan of fantasy novels. But at this point in time, they couldn't tell.

You might say 'It has just been 10 days' or 'It has already been 10 days', everyone had a different interpretation about this. But the three of them had been forced to grow accustomed to this world.

This was the addition of alternate world physics on top of Elder Tales setting. In this world twisted by these two factors, there were still some rules and accompanying logic.

Even if all the food was tasteless, even if strange effects existed, they still followed a set of laws. They often felt frustrated by these effects that defied common sense, but they had to try to understand this logic and live in this world.

They had to live in the world they were in, be it the game world or real world.

(Since we can't find a way back, this is the only world for us now. We can't do anything about it being the game or real world... It's not too bad after you get used to swinging swords and adventuring... Although I put on a brave face and told Marie-san 'This is far from the worst case scenario', I just wanted to say this more than anyone else.)

It was a good thing for Naotsugu to get used to this so quickly. He had nothing against the world he was from, but if someone asked if he would risk his life to go back, his answer would be 'I don't know'.

(I don't have a girlfriend who will show me panties, and I haven't seen my parents in 2 years... I have gotten used to work, but there was nothing very satisfying about it.)

From Ichigaya passing through Kudanshita, they were just a couple of zones away from Akiba.

They were not going by the Archive Tower Forest today, opting to go via the slope of Ochanomizu. As they passed by the gentle slope of Roka Charity Hospital, Naotsugu was reminded of home. In the Japanese garden on the right side of the road stood a large tree with plenty of branches wearing its leaves like a jacket.

The moon could be glimpsed through the leaves. The shadows of the leaves jerked unnaturally, making Naotsugu and the others scatter away from the tree hastily.

(...!)

Naotsugu dashed at full speed into the darkness and bashed at the bushes with his shield.

A yell could be heard from the dark.

He could feel Shiroe's presence behind him more than a dozen meters away.

Even as Naotsugu focused on his forehead, he did not let down his guard and scanned his surroundings.

(There are 1, 2... 3? 4?)

Even though this was within expectations, he could still feel his throat drying up when facing it. This tension was totally different from when fighting monsters.

Suddenly, he heard the sounds of chains being dragged on the ground.

(Uu, too late!)

Naotsugu did not check his back as he attempted to jump, but snake-like chains had entangled his ankles. These were not real chains with a physical form, but a magical binding spell that seemed almost real when it bound their foes.

Naotsugu lost his balance in the air, his movements sealed by magic. At this moment, a silent and colorless magic wave came from behind.

Dispel Magic.

It should be Shiroe who was casting it.

The snake-like chain binding Naotsugu's ankles was disintegrated by Shiroe's Dispel.

(You're always so quick with support! Well, what do we do, tactician?)

The excitement of battle rose in his heart, Shiroe was right behind him giving his full support. Naotsugu's confidence lifted his spirits.

"Naotsugu, straight line formation. Our enemies are PKers, I have visual contact on 4. I'll determine their location... There!"

Shiroe shouted on the road covered by the shadows of the trees in the middle of the night.

A greenish white bolt shot out of his staff. Mind Bolt was the basic attack spell of Enchanters, it would strike at a single opponent, causing some damage.

It had less attack power compared to summoners and sorcerers of the same level. But as the basic attack of the Enchanters, Shiroe had many chances to use it.

Shiroe complained about his low attack power often, but Naotsugu thought this was no big deal. Instead of powerful spells that often missed, simple spells at the right time were much better.

"Enemy sighted!"

Shiroe's spell was performing as he expected.

The light of the spell only shone for a fraction of a second, but it was enough to see the PK-ers hidden in the darkness.

Naotsugu retreated as per Shiroe's instructions about half way between the darkness and Shiroe. He was right on the line dividing the 2-way road.

After confirming the enemies' position, Naotsugu could attack them.

But instead he intentionally retreated to his position in the formation.

In a line formation, the distance between the front and back was crucial. If they were too far apart, the rear would be open to attacks.

"They have guts, turning to PKing... They miss their mommies so much they have turned into animals? Thinking they can celebrate victory by ambushing us, don't make me laugh."

Naotsugu turned the passion in his heart into words.

The enemies were not monsters.

Naotsugu despised this act of players the most.

PK means 'player kill' or 'player killer', instead of fighting monsters, a player hunted other players.

Akiba was designated as a non-combat zone, which meant other zones might not have such a designation and battles were allowed.

In Elder Tales, players battling other players was an officially recognized way of playing.

But due to factors in Elder Tales such as the low success rate, high risk and cultural aversion of the Japanese... Japanese players were very law abiding and hated violence among players... PKing was not popular there.

The mini-map in Elder Tales showed all players, monsters, and NPC around them, the chance for PKing to work was very low.

High-level players would have an innate evasion rate without the need for players to input any command, lowering the probability of PKing working even further.

... Simply put, sneak attacks were not effective.

PKing was not banned in Elder Tales, but harassment, which meant harassing players and causing undue distress, was. Although PK itself was not harassment, targeting specific players or abusing them with words were actions that might be judged as harassment. The official might then deal out a warning or the ban hammer.

But harassment was very much dependent on personal opinion and prejudice. Even a proper PK might be viewed as harassment if the victim was a lady, resulting in the perpetrator being locked out of his account.

That's why PKing was a high risk action.

But things were different in this alternate world.

They couldn't view the mini map on their screen anymore, and even high-level players could be ambushed if they were not conscious of the incoming attack.

Unless the player was a real-life martial artist, no one could keep their guard up all the time.

Harassment reports could only be done after the officials reviewed the records. When Elder Tales was still a game, order was maintained through the Game Masters' 'Hand of God'. But such convenient saviors didn't exist in this world anymore.

... The chance of a sneak attack working increased, the risk of being reported was gone.

And PKing gave lots of benefits.

After defeating other players, they could be stripped of all their gold and some items. Although some items could not be dropped, half the salable items in your bag would be lost, spread around your corpse.

There were more cons than pros back then, but that had been reversed.

This was the reason why PKing was becoming a regular occurrence in Elder Tales.

Part 3

(We made it past the sneak attack phase... Their advantages are numbers, terrain, and preparation. Our advantages are...)

Shiroe's staff shone as he went through the spells he could use. He didn't have to choose the spells using the game menu, his common spells had already been prepared on his hotkeys.

Before Shiroe raised his staff to cast any spells, several players showed themselves.

The dry debris of the asphalt road cracked loudly in the quiet night.

Four shadows emerged from the darkness.

One dressed like a fighter, two as bandits, one like a healer.

Their levels and numbers were high, their footsteps steady.

"Leave everything you are carrying, and we won't kill you."

The warrior said these cliché words in a disparaging tone.

Shiroe laughed bitterly when he heard this.

(If they are talking like that, they have read too much manga.)

They were already used to hunting monsters, but battling other players was a different thing. Unlike the monsters moving by animal instincts, this induced the fear of unpredictability. And humans were not dense enough to be ignorant of malicious intents of the enemies.

Monsters also had killing intent, but PKers had the malicious intent of profiting off others' efforts.

Shiroe's palms were sweating before he realized.

But the cliché line washed away the tension, and Shiroe was grateful for that.

"Guardian and a Mage, right? You want to put up a hopeless fight? We have 4 on our side, alright?"

The man dressed like a bandit, who seemed to be the leader, said. The two long sword on his waist hinted his class to be a Swashbuckler. Out of the 12 classes, only the Swashbuckler and Samurai could equip 2 weapons without the use of special items and with putting in minimal effort.

"What should we do, Naotsugu?"

"Kill them. Pick out the bones, chop them into mincemeat, and kill them again. These guys attack people

for fun, they can't complain if someone else kills them."

The reliable voice of Naotsugu revitalized the strength in Shiroe's legs.

(Breathing normal, sense of balance is intact... Emotions are calm, I can do this. This is something we expected... Just a matter of time before we faced this road.)

Shiroe mumbled to himself. He was already prepared to fight, but wanted to drag the conversation a bit longer if possible.

"Naotsugu hates PKing after all... Actually, I'm willing to give them the money."

The PK group sneered at Shiroe's words.

They took half a step forward, showing their ugly threatening attitude. Shiroe averted his eyes from the pressure, even though he expected this.

(That must be it... They are looking down on us, thinking we will fork over the cash if they apply a bit more pressure.)

Shiroe felt he had split into two. One of him had trembling legs from fear, the other was thinking calmly and clearly. He could also feel his pulse beating warmly by his ears, a sensation he had had several times during the Tea Party.

Shiroe was not good in handling Akatsuki, but he didn't hate her.

Shiroe hated fighting, but he was good at it.

"If they can beat us."

"Well said, Shiro."

The PK group was either surprised by their conversation or angered by their insolence. Their faces turned red as they drew their weapons while cursing.

The red 'battle mode' warning on the status screen had been flashing in the corner of his eyes since the sneak attack.

Shiroe took half a step back with his left foot and prayed his voice would be steady as he gave his command.

"Target the warrior on the left, draw the others' attention too!"

"I will handle the tank, go take out the Mage!"

The sound of Shiroe's command and the bandit leader's roar sounded out at the same time.

Naotsugu took a step forward and slammed his shield at the warrior. His opponent was wielding a katana, meaning he was a Samurai.

The bandit with long hair flanked Naotsugu on his leader's command, attempting to reach Shiroe with a leap. But this was one of the developments Shiroe anticipated.

Shiroe cast his spell in an instant.

Astral Bind.

Similar to the magic that had bound Naotsugu, it restricted the movements of the enemies.

When the defensibly weak mage adventured alone, this spell could restrict the movements of monsters. This was followed by range attack from a safe distance. A basic battle strategy.

The spells of mages might differ in details, but they had many common spells, including binding spells.

But binding spells had no other effects.

The long-haired bandit was left with no choice other than to turn and attack Naotsugu, who was right beside him. He attacked with his daggers that were almost the length of a short sword. Binding spells restricted the opponent's long range movement, but it didn't deprive them of all freedom. It was similar to leashing a dog with a chain to a pole, they could still move around within a short range. The binding spell would last only for a short while.

"Let's change, I leave this to you!"

"I'm on it!"

Under the sparks of the clashing weapons, the leader made a simple feint and attempted to break through Naotsugu's defense line.

Their strategy at the start should have let the leader engage Naotsugu, leaving the others to take down Shiroe. But seeing his subordinate bounded, he decided to change the strategy by going for Shiroe himself.

His judgment to adjust his plans on the fly was commendable. His flanking action making use of the feint was fast.

(... But that is not enough to match Naotsugu's experience.)

"Anchor Howl!"

Naotsugu lowered his center of mass and shouted fiercely.

This howl that shook the air was a skill of the Guardian.

The bandit leader that should have slipped past Naotsugu flinched his body as he turned to face Naotsugu with his swords raised on reflex.

He lost strength in his legs, and he was unable to look away from Naotsugu. Cold sweat broke out all over his body, the long-haired bandit and the Samurai were suffering the same sense of fear with their eyes wide open.

They would lose their lives if they didn't stare at Naotsugu. That was the horrifying feeling the 3 of them felt from Naotsugu.

Naotsugu was a Guardian who protected their comrades. They were known as tanks because they were the shield absorbing the opponent's attack.

But having high defense and HP was not enough to act as a tank. Monsters like goblins and orcs might possess similar intelligence to humans, the players might encounter dark elves or cultist as well, and this was the world of Elder Tales.

Opponents ignoring the tank and going for the healer and mage behind were common too.

Guardians were built around the policy of protecting their allies, so they didn't just have high HP and defense.

Anchor Howl was a skill Guardians cast with their fighting spirit. Foes who heard this howl would not be able to ignore Naotsugu. The moment they tried, they would be hit by a powerful counterattack. This skill granted Guardians additional attacks if their enemy's attention lapsed.

The skills to focus all the enemies' attention on themselves was one of the reasons why Guardians were known as the fortress among the warrior classes.

"Tch, Don't be scared! We are going 3 on 1, he will go down no matter how tough he is, take him first!"

The bandit leader encouraged his men despite the fear he was feeling.

The Swashbuckler was forced to switch tactics again, locking on to Naotsugu and searching for his weak points with his double swords dancing like a snake.

The rogue Samurai, double swords leader and the long-haired bandit were determined to take out Naotsugu first.

It was not wrong to do that.

"Damn it! You are just tough like a turtle, nothing impressive!"

The enemy screamed hysterically as they attacked in a flurry.

"Your swords won't break through my armor!"

Naotsugu's bold and cheery statement made them double up on their attacks.

Shiroe checked Naotsugu's status as he listened to the sharp clash of metals.

This group had the skills to back up their words with good courage and teamwork. Naotsugu's HP dwindled under their relentless attacks.

Even Naotsugu wouldn't last another 30 seconds.

(That is, if they can keep up the attack for 30 seconds...!)

Shiroe grinned. He was not going to give them this amount of time.

Drawing a symbol with the tip of his staff took 1.5 seconds. Shiroe created a buzzing lightning ball and shot it at the Samurai. This was a 'damage over time' spell called Electric Fuzz, persistently dealing low damage to an opponent for 10-20 seconds.

"Ha! You're an Enchanter? What's that spell? You can't even kill a dog with this!"

The Samurai just snorted in annoyance despite being hit. The tennis ball sized lightning sphere was loud and bright, but its damage was so low it didn't hurt.

Enchanters' spells on the whole lacked attack power, but damage over time magic could spread its power over a period of time. Its total damage exceeded Mind Bolt, but each wave of damage was insignificant.

The feeling of scratching an itch matched the low damage of the spell. It was just a harmless prank to the Samurai.

(It is weak, but...)

The taunts went to and fro, but Shiroe didn't react to the Samurai's sneer since he knew the features of his spells. He cast the same Electric Fuzz on the bandit leader and long-haired bandit next.

The dual wield based class had less HP than the Samurai from the warrior class. But this low damage magic was painless to them.

"Hahahaha! What were you trying to accomplish with that spell? Are you a greenhorn following this chum?"

The greenish white sparks shone like a shorted wire or some misshapen fireworks. The three PKers redoubled their effort on attacking Naotsugu.

(... Alright then, let's get rid of one.)

The anger, carelessness, and sneer of the enemy.

Absorbing these emotions like data and preparing in a deep breath, Shiroe took two steps forward ready to act. He wielded his staff as he chanted, using his magic with the hotkey.

He cast Thorn Bind Hostage after chanting for 2 seconds. Five shiny rings flew towards the Samurai and morphed into 5 vines entangling him.

"What is this? Ah!"

Naotsugu slashed at the Samurai, a lightning ball seemed to explode in the darkness. The Samurai screamed as he backed away on reflex from the impact.



Thorn Bind Hostage was a trap attack spell frequently used by Shiroe. Unlike single target or wide area attacks, it had a more complicated activation requirement. It also needed to be cast on the enemy beforehand.

Enemies who were affected by the spell would suffer about 1000 points of additional damage when attacked by the Enchanter's allies.

The number of vines and the damage it dealt differed by level. Shiroe's Thorn Bind Hostage was Secret level, even a warrior class would lose half his HP if all five vines were triggered.

"Calm down, this is a damn trap spell. Dispel it, healer! Concentrate on healing our Samurai! We have double their numbers, there is no way we can lose!"

Unlike the damaged Samurai, the bandit leader was still in control. Healers played a critical role in the Elder Tales setting.

With a powerful healer using high-level spells, damage of several allies about the same level could be restored completely.

If the healing was consistent, Shiroe's Thorn Bind Hostage was nothing to worry about.

The bandit leader had a plan of taking on a Sorcerer, who had more powerful attacks than an Enchanter, so he remained confident in this battle.

Naotsugu slashed again.

Every swing activated the shockwave damage from the vines. Every time the Samurai tried to take up a stance, the sword strike and the vine explosion threw him off balance again.

"Ha, this is nothing, your flank is open!"

The long-haired bandit slashed at Naotsugu's right flank with his machete. Naotsugu who was immobile after his attack couldn't avoid this attack.

"This battle will be decided by the presence of healers! Don't underestimate us, chums! Hahahaha! Cry on your way to the cathedral!"

Naotsugu's attack was strengthened by Shiroe's magic, dealing damage above a normal warrior class. The Secret level spell was also one of the few Enchanter skills that could deal heavy damage. But that wouldn't be enough to outperform the healing spells of a healer about the same level. The laughter of the bandit leader came from this confidence.

"That is the correct analysis."

"If your healer is doing his job!"

Naotsugu lowered his body to halve his height in an instant and slashed at the Samurai's knee.

This blow was like a giant praying mantis striking, throwing the Samurai to the ground.

He did not fly off with the blow or spray blood all over the place. The Samurai was fighting fiercely one second and dropped motionless on the ground the next, cutting off the bandit leader's laughter.

"W... What's happening? What did you do!? Paralysis? Hey, healer! Stop fooling around, heal him!"

The bandit leader yelled as Naotsugu swung his sword and said:

"You annoying fellow, stop spouting ugly minion speeches on this beautiful night."

"You! What did you say?"

(This is faster than I imagined, what a reliable pro technique.)

Shiroe looked to the vast forest on the right of the courtyard.

Everyone was standing on the road full of bright greenish white light and couldn't see deep into the bushes of the courtyard.

As Shiroe knew his companion was inside that bush.

"Fuck it! Enough! Hey, Sorcerer! Summoner! Use everything you got to burn them into crisp!"

The bandit leader decided to show his hidden cards and throw in his reserve forces.

(So there were two other mages. They might be able to kill us if they join the fray. Even though the Samurai fell, it is still 5 on 2 so he's confident thinking we will lose.)

Shiroe deduced the thinking of the bandit leader. But even the reserve forces were within Shiroe's expectations.

(They used a binding spell on Naotsugu right from the start, but only a warrior, two bandits and a healer turned up. They already let the cat out of the bag at that point in time.)

Shiroe already knew the PK group was holding a Mage in reserve standing by in the dense forest.

(Mages have low HP and defense, but they left them alone in the forest without a bodyguard. Which means...)

"Hey, hurry up! Kill these bastards!"

The bandit leader shouted in a panic while pointing his sword at Naotsugu. But the tip of his sword was more than a meter away from Naotsugu.

Shiroe and Naotsugu's tactics and weird atmosphere had depleted the morale of the PKers.

"Seems like we won."

"You are right, my lord."

A small figure appeared from behind the broad leaved tree.

Akatsuki with her usual serious expression dragged two Mages with her and dumped them on the road. The beautiful young girl shorter than 150cm in height throwing the PKers like trash made the bandit leader lose his composure.

"What, what, what are you doing? Why didn't you report in? H-healer! Didn't I tell you to manage our HP! Did, did you betray us..."

"This is why I said you're annoying."

The bandit leader's speech annoyed Naotsugu too much, and he knocked the leader with his shield. The leader lost his balance from this sudden attack and fell on his butt.

"It's better to trust your teammates. Your healer has been sleeping since the start of the battle."

Shiroe's cruel announcement could be heard on the whole road.

This was the spell Astral Hypnos.

The binding spell that was one of the two invaluable weapons of an Enchanter alongside Keen Edge. A magic that forced any target to fall asleep, a stoppage spell. It only lasted a dozen or so seconds no matter how you extended it.

The target would wake up when attacked, so it was a prank magic in a sense, used to buy some time.

Battle was a way of stripping each other of the ability to fight. The goal was to kill off the other party. Just putting the opponent to sleep wouldn't win you the fight. It was a spell that wouldn't affect the fight directly.

That was why Enchanters were seen as a 2nd-rate class.

"Do not underestimate my lord's magic."

"!"

The road had returned to silence all of a sudden.

The lightning balls had stopped sparkling after its duration ran out. Both bandits were sitting on the ground while the healer was sleeping soundly. Shiroe's group looked down at them.

"You underestimated the sparkles of the lightning balls, ignoring it because of its low damage. But having bright lights near your eyes obscured your vision of the forest's dark areas. You wouldn't see the situation in the forest or realize your healer was sleeping. You only think about fighting, your teamwork is full of loopholes. It is easy to assassinate your reserves."

After Akatsuki finished, Naotsugu swung down his sword as if he was looking forward to it. The long-haired bandit who had lost his fighting spirit screamed like a high-pitched whistle and died.

"We, will revive even after dying, we haven't lost yet!"

The bandit leader was still acting tough, but he couldn't move with Akatsuki's blade on his throat.

Akatsuki asked Shiroe with her eyes.

She was asking for permission to proceed.

Shiroe gave a long sigh.

Tying him up, robbing him of everything, and then interrogating him was possible. But Shiroe's nature was not suitable for interrogation, so he couldn't really do that.

(We can also let him go, but... Even if we do that...)

He probably wouldn't be grateful for that.

And he wouldn't take this as a lesson and repent.

He would definitely see it as an insult and bear a grudge. Death was just a ritual in this world anyway. It made one doubt there was a crime and punishment system like the real world.

Shiroe understood this.

But Shiroe still felt that one must not act without any regards to the law.

(There's no other way.)

Shiroe nodded at Akatsuki. She stuck the blade into the bandit leader's throat without hesitation. Blood that looked red and dirty in the dark night sprayed from his throat.

Akatsuki deftly turned her body to avoid the spray as gold and items dropped around the leader.

This ended the attack of the PKers.

Part 4

"So the rumors that security has gone bad are true."

Naotsugu, who was picking up the loot, commented and Shiroe shrugged in response. They had looked at ease before, with the wild bandits, but it had not been an easy victory.

There had been six enemies after all. The enemies level had been high, even though they were not level 90 yet. Naotsugu who used defensive skills had lost half his HP.

If Akatsuki hadn't taken out the reserve forces in the darkness... No, if Akatsuki hadn't hidden her presence immediately when they were attacked, understanding what Shiroe had meant when he said 'I see four of them' and taken out the ambush party, who knows how the battle would have turned out.

Shiroe, Naotsugu, and even Akatsuki still had an ace up their sleeves. But to turn the tide of battle required a cool head. If they used their ace in a state of panic, they would still lose no matter how good that ace was. By keeping calm and playing their cards at the right time, they could maximize its effectiveness to obtain victory.

There were two reasons why Shiroe's party won. The first was the overconfidence of the PKers due to their advantage in numbers. The second was the better team work of Shiroe's group.

"Any other PKers hiding around here?"

Akatsuki asked in a gloomy tone while looking towards the cluster of abandoned buildings.

"That should be all of them."

Shiroe answered.

The most important thing about PKing was the element of surprise, so they needed an appropriate place to set up. There was the possibility of their target escaping into the city if they went further ahead, so it was not suitable to PK there.

(We need to stay alert though, it is getting dangerous out here.)

Shiroe thought there was another reason why they won.

Because they knew about the news of the deteriorating security in the city.

Shiroe's group had also heard rumors of rampant PKers roaming around.

They hid around the field zone surrounding Akiba and ambushed the unsuspecting under the cover of darkness. The group that they defeated seemed to have been experienced in PK to the extent that they were overconfident.

Shiroe's team kept their guard up while moving because they had heard the news and were wary of any shadows lurking in the bushes.

"They are the 'Dread Pack'? What a cliché name."

That was the guild name of the PK team they defeated, it probably meant they were a group that terrorizes others.

"Can't be helped, it would be too much to ask of PKers to come up with classy names."

Naotsugu displayed the disgust in his heart without reservation and Akatsuki agreed with him.

(Well, I am furious about this too.)

Shiroe sighed.

Naotsugu hated PKers, and Shiroe disliked them too.

There were many reasons to dislike them, but the main reason was that Shiroe simply found them unsightly.

Wanting to profit off other people's hard work was already an unsightly idea. The gold and items you could get through PK would not get you to the top levels, so Shiroe thought they were extremely unsightly.

Taking others' treasure meant they did not step into the high level zone that contained these rewards. Not only do you miss out on exploring unknown places and mysteries, you wouldn't run into treasures you had never seen before as well. You wouldn't be able to stand at the peak of adventures if you relied on PKing.

So PKers would always be relegated to parasite status, feeding off other people's rewards.

That was what Shiroe thought.

(...To criticize the personality of players while trapped in an alternate world... Maybe this is something that cannot be helped. Everyone has been pushed to the edge mentally.)

Regrettably, the situation of being on edge was becoming part of their daily lives, that was how this world was.

"I have also heard such rumors."

"Other than that, 'Tidal Clan', 'Blue Impact' and 'Canossa' are all into PK."

Shiroe answered Akatsuki's comment.

"I can understand people being freaked out, but even so... Shouldn't there be other things for them to do?"

"Like what?"

"Like chatting about panties."

Akatsuki took a step back.

She turned her head and looked around her before taking another step back.

"Two steps... She took two steps back...?"

Naotsugu was depressed while Shiroe patted his shoulders to cheer him up. Naotsugu tried to describe the wonders of panties, but Akatsuki silenced him by saying 'Shut up, pervert'.

The power relations of the party had gradually been set.

(Other. Things. They. Should. Do...)

There was nothing to do, which was the current problem.

You could get by with cheap food if you just wanted to live.

Even if it was tasteless soggy crackers, there was nothing to complain if it kept you alive. In countries in the South East Asia region, states at war and cities facing famine had children starving to death with their eyes praying for food.

But they wouldn't face such a food crisis anytime soon.

Food could be crafted using ingredients in Elder Tales, and the ingredients could in turn be gathered from the field zones. Defeated monsters might drop meat, and mushrooms and berries could be plucked from the forest. You could fish in the sea and even cultivate and harvest plants.

He didn't know about this world, but Elder Tales had four seasons. It seemed to be summer now and food was everywhere out in the field.

So even a beginner who was less than level 10 could get food from the relatively safe field zones.

The issue lay with the low percentage of players with the Chef subclass to craft the food. But quite a number of players had changed their subclass to Chef in the past 10 days.

Having nutritious meals was the basics of survival and was a reasonable strategy.

It was the same with clothes.

They could get fur by skinning beasts or make sheets of clothes using silk or hemp. If you were not picky about the stats of the equipment, production players could make one cloth in a few dozen seconds. Daily necessities like shoes could be produced by Tailors, Blacksmiths or Carpenters. Normal sized equipment could be created by these craftsmen, while small and fine products were made by Artisans.

As for accommodation, you could spend the night in any abandoned building if you weren't too concerned with safety or comfort.

A night in a cheap hotel cost 5 gold, but even a level 10 player could get that money by defeating a few goblins. You could also opt to rent a place at a nice hotel for months or purchase a space such as a guild

hall as a group. You could buy a room by yourself too, there were many ways to secure a place to sleep.

In other words, just surviving in this alternate world didn't require you to risk your life or work long hours.

There were no dire situations if you just wanted to survive.

(But rather than living, this is more like 'not dying'.)

Shiroe thought this type of noncompetitive environment caused the players to lose their goal in life, meaning they had nothing to do.

This was a very free alternate world.

It might be too liberal.

Naotsugu would probably have said 'The objective of living? Things we should do? This should be decided and worked on by ourselves, right? Such as discussing or protecting girls. Just like what panties ladies wear should be decided by themselves.' There was nothing wrong with this view, and Shiroe didn't want to object it.

But some might agree while others wouldn't.

If people didn't set a goal and work towards it, it was easy for them to be tempted onto the wrong path. There were such people everywhere, like the ones who boosted their ego by bullying others.

(It's the same with PK. There are many simple and safe ways to live in this world. If you just want to survive, there is no need to earn lots of cash or resort to PKing.)

Hence, PKing was not a means of staying alive. For instance in poor countries, people might be forced to become robbers to feed themselves. But PK was totally different from that.

For these people, PKing was something they felt they should do. A means to give them enjoyment apart from just staying alive. This made Shiroe feel that PK was even more unsightly.

"Wait a minute, wah!"

Naotsugu yelled.

"What is it?"

"These guys only have 62 gold combined, just how poor are they?"

"But the items they have are not too bad."

Naotsugu and Akatsuki had accounted for all the drop items and gold. The loot seemed pretty disappointing.

"PKing carries a high risk. Unless they're stupid, they will just bring the bare necessities. The rest of their

stuff should be in the bank. What we see here are items they robbed from others."

The two of them sighed deeply at Shiroe's comment.

Part 5

It was almost midnight when they reached Akiba.

The streets seemed to be full of killing intent.

The city center, consisting of the metro city square, major road junction and a bridge, was filled with stalls as usual. The crowd was substantial there as well, but the darker outskirts of the city and the dim alleys of the ruins had suspicious players. They were wary of others and kept a distance from people when walking the streets.

(Security really is going bad...)

Shiroe's group had been heading to the field zone to hunt monsters these past few days.

It was crucial to share your information in the city ever since that terrible event. Issues regarding eating, sleeping, the basic mechanism and structure of this world, there were many things they needed to confirm.

After gathering this basic data, Shiroe's group had decided to find out about the field zones and how much battle had changed.

This was the policy the 3 of them had come up with, but it was taking a longer time than expected.

Using magic and skills was vastly different than mastering them. Shiroe and Naotsugu already had this idea, and Akatsuki was also gaining this viewpoint as time passed.

The bigger the difference between using and mastering, the more time it took to make up the difference through practice. Confirming the features of each skill, researching its uses and experimenting with it. The amount of data in Elder Tales was enough to make beginners cry, but it was double... No, several times more in this alternate world.

Take Cross Slash, for instance.

This was a basic combo attack of Guardians, striking a foe twice in the shape of a cross. Guardians learned this early since it was a basic skill and they had many opportunities to use it. According to Naotsugu, there were five ways to activate this skill.

"Slashing from top right to bottom left, then strike up vertically is the basics. But you can also start with top left to bottom right, which suits left handers better. You can also do a horizontal slice followed by a vertical cut."

That's how it was.

This skill, or rather this basic battle movement, had already been saved inside their body. Based on the two fighting class players, Naotsugu and Akatsuki, if you had the will to fight and could see your enemies' movements, your body would act automatically.

But you needed lots of practice to tie down the delicate movements. There was no telling if practicing like real world martial artists would work, but the weapon wielding duo was the same as Shiroe. They had to go through the process of research, experimentation and adjustment.

For ranged attack spells, aiming with your staff would raise your accuracy than solely using hotkeys. This was also something Shiroe found out through experimenting.

Apart from finding trivial but crucial things when using skills, it would be hard to use it on the enemy without practicing teamwork as well.

The three of them had the roles of tank, hitter and support command, but teamwork was more than just completing your assigned tasks.

Naotsugu needed to find ways to aggro the enemy, leaving his allies free to work. Akatsuki also needed to accumulate knowledge and experience, knowing which of Naotsugu's attacks would expose the opponent's weak point.

The burden on Shiroe was even heavier.

He needed to know what his comrades could and couldn't do to command effectively. He needed to know their habits and even breathing patterns to increase the completeness of their formation. He had countless things to investigate and remember, which would take time for him to master. This was the daily life of Shiroe's party.

Maryele and the Crescent Moon Alliance had also been a great help towards Shiroe's group.

Crescent Moon Alliance was set up with the objective of mutual support. They had few high level players, but they had more manpower as they were a guild, able to send people to farm in the field zone and collate intelligence from the streets at the same time.

The guild was divided into 3 shifts, taking turns to harvest resources in the field, buy materials, and get information on the streets, or craft items with production skills. Doing things in shifts seemed more efficient.

As they had agreed, Shiroe's team would be getting data on the level 60 and above zones in exchange for information Maryele's group canvassed on the streets. They would also trade high level items in exchange for food and equipment.

They were working hard in the area they were good at and sharing the results.

(Mary-nee mentioned some people are really stressed out... probably has something to do with the PKing.)

Shiroe sighed at this deduction because this was second hand information he got from Maryele. But since he had experienced PK himself, this should be a fact.

The interior of the metro provided shelter from the rain, making it an excellent place to set up shops. Shiroe's party passed through it and headed for the city square in front of the metro. There should have

been an open air promenade in the real world here, but it was just a vast area overgrown with moss and grass in this alternate world.

Although the surrounding buildings were desolated, the first floor of every one of them was occupied by a shop. The majority of Akiba's commercial facilities were located here.

Like the marketplace NPC that helped the players to trade, the Blacksmith and Tailor teachers aided the production beginners. Other than teaching the basic skills, they would also provide free access to their furnace and sewing tables.

Most of the items in this world came from monsters or treasure chests in dungeons. They may also have been crafted by production players. To assist the low level players on their adventures, NPCs would also sell basic weapons and armors.

The commercial facilities around the city square also had such merchant NPCs.

The NPC population in this world was much larger than in the game. The players had been shocked at first, but got used to it over time.

They hadn't done a proper headcount, but there were about 6-10 times more than in the game.

The basic services in the city area followed that of the game and was available 24 hours. But the NPCs still needed to eat and rest, so the increase in population was probably because of the need to work on shifts.

They lived according to their own timetable and stayed in their residence above their shops. But they didn't buy player crafted goods or magic items, so it was hard to judge whether they were involved in this world's economy.

Unlike in the game, the actions of these NPCs were similar to that of humans. You might mistake them for players if you didn't check with your status screen.

"Want to buy something? Or eat something?"

Naotsugu asked Akatsuki in a feeble voice.

"Ah, what shall we do, my lord?"

Akatsuki asked Shiroe in an indifferent tone. They were not motivated by the prospect of eating and got gloomy during meal time.

"Yeah... Hold on first, let's make a trip over to see if Mary-nee is still awake."

Shiroe had decided. Even if the food tasted the same at Crescent Moon Alliance, eating at Maryele's place was still better. The atmosphere's impact on a meal couldn't be underestimated.

They had loot from hunting monsters and fighting the PKers, so they could sell it to Crescent Moon Alliance. It would then be crafted into items and flow back into the market, giving it back to the community.

Shiroe opened his menu and called Maryele via telepathy.

Maryele should still be awake at this hour, but her answering speed seemed too fast.

"Yo Shiro-bouyan, where are you?"

"Back in the city."

Maryele's greeting was the same as always, but it seemed a bit more anxious.

"Come over to my guild."

"Is it convenient? Not sleeping yet?"

"I was just thinking of contacting you. Anyway, just come over."

"Convenient for Naotsugu and Akatsuki to tag along?"

Shiroe had introduced Naotsugu and Akatsuki to Maryele when interacting with Crescent Moon Alliance. The trio visited the guild quite often and even joined some members to battle monsters, so they were all familiar faces there.

"Of course, that will be even better. I will wait for you guys."

The call ended. Shiroe had felt hectic signs in the background while conversing with Maryele. It seemed like Crescent Moon Alliance was still active this late at night.

"What is it, Shiro?"

Naotsugu, who sensed something different about Shiroe, asked casually. Naotsugu showed kindness in these small matters. Shiroe was secretly impressed as he turned to face the two and said:

"Let's make a trip to Crescent Moon Alliance, seems like something is up."

Part 6

There was an air of panic in the guild hall of Crescent Moon Alliance. The one leading the way was a young healer that gave the impression of a puppy. After ushering the trio into guild master Maryele's room, he turned and left in a hurry.

Maryele's room was even messier than their last visit, but she managed to squeeze out a place for her guests and prepare tea for them.

Henrietta was still hard at work tidying the office. It was close to midnight, but there was no sense of peace and quiet here.

The youths were carrying items, and the members were accounting for weapons. The atmosphere felt uneasy; it was as if they were packing for a journey.

"Sorry for the mess Shiroe-sama... Hold it. Wah, isn't this Akatsuki-chan!"

Henrietta dropped her broom upon seeing Akatsuki and rushed over to hug her. Henrietta had a thing for cute little girls, and Akatsuki was just her type. She always acted like this ever since they met.

Henrietta was of average height for females, so Akatsuki was shorter than her by half a head. Akatsuki looked like a black cat annoyed by her master's adoration when Henrietta hugged her.

"Welcome back, everyone. It's a bit messy here, hope you don't mind."

Maryele glanced at Naotsugu and Akatsuki before winking at Shiroe. Shiroe breathed a sigh of relief at her mischievous demeanor.

"What happened, Mary-nee?"

"An... anyway, don't rush me, sit, let me serve you water, water that looks like tea hehehehe..."

The 3 sat in response to Maryele's invitation.

Shiroe and Naotsugu sat on the couch while Akatsuki sat on a backless sofa, as Henrietta was still embracing her from behind.

"... Ah... Erm."

Everyone was seated, but Maryele still couldn't find the words to say. Shiroe waited quietly for quite a while before speaking out.

"Going for an expedition?"

"Yeah."

"To where?"

"Hmmm, should I say Ezzo? Anyway, we are going to Susukino."

Susukino was one of the 5 major cities in Elder Tales.

A zone under the management of the Japanese server.

Under the Half-Gaia project, the position and shape of the path between Akiba and Susukino were similar, but the distance was half, and the area was a quarter.

The virtual Japan in Elder Tales, known as Yamato, was divided into 5 states. Real-world Hokkaido was the Ezzo Empire, Shikoku was the Fourland Dukedom, Kyuushuu was the Ninetails Dominion, eastern Japan's main island was the League of Freedom Towns Eastal, and the western part was the Holy Empire Westelande.

There were tens of thousands of players living in Yamato that was equivalent to real world Japan. There were also numerous NPCs known as the People of the Land living in many cities, towns, and countless villages.

5 of these cities were in a league of their own.

Susukino, Shibuya, Akiba, Minami, and Nakasu.

As places that could be chosen as starter cities, the commercial facilities were excellent and the surrounding area was suitable for beginners, with lower level monsters. There were lots of simple quests, and there were cathedrals for players to respawn should they fall in battle. All these advantages made these cities a good base of operation.

The 5 cities were also connected by the intercity transport gate, so players could move around with ease.

That was before the disaster happened.

The players were gradually referring to this incident as the Catastrophe. Some called this the teleportation, summoning, or sliding into an alternate world. But as the actual situation remained unknown, Catastrophe was the term most frequently used.

Shiroe thought the term Catastrophe sounded better than alternate world teleportation. If you used the word teleport or summon, it was almost like giving up on the possibility of going back. Shiroe had this concern as well, that's probably why most people chose the term Catastrophe instead.

"Any news of the intercity transport gate getting repaired?"

"No one is repairing, we don't know if it's broken or not."

Maryele became more cheerful after starting the conversation and explained the situation to Shiroe's

group.

"As I mentioned before, Crescent Moon Alliance is a small guild. We have gotten some new members recently, so our numbers are 24 with most of us here in this building. But we have a female member, Serara, currently in Susukino. She is a cute Druid, a level 19 beginner in Crescent Moon Alliance. Eh, this kind of personal data is not important. She is a bit shy and weak in character, but wants to experience running a business and plays Elder Tales to do that, a unique person."

Maryele gazed downwards as she spoke.

"Serara was in Susukino the day the Catastrophe happened. There was a group recruiting players around level 20 for a raid, so Serara decided to join them to train since others in the guild were busy... She was playing around with the raid party in Susukino when the Catastrophe happened. With the intercity transport gate down, Serara got stuck there."

Henrietta added after Maryele and sighed deeply.

"Going over to bring her back?"

Maryele and Henrietta nodded when Shiroe asked.

"I'm not sure, but has any player gone over to Susukino since the Catastrophe?"

Akatsuki asked on behalf of the group.

Shiroe was also thinking about this.

Without the intercity gate, there were only 2 other ways to travel.

Using the Fairy Rings scattered around the region to teleport to other places, or traveling on foot zone by zone.

Fairy Rings were a teleportation device located in the field zones, a magic circle formed by several boulders. You could teleport from one Fairy Ring to another, a teleportation network in the world of Elder Tales.

The connections between Fairy Rings were affected by the lunar cycle using a complicated formula. If you were familiar with it, you could complete your journey in a very short time. But using it at the wrong time would teleport you to unknown places.

"As far as I know, no one has attempted that. No one has the energy to spare as they go through each day and they don't have the heart to care about other cities, which is understandable. Using Fairy Rings without consulting online guides is suicidal. If you want to travel by horse or foot to Susukino, you need to prepare for a journey of 2 weeks with several obstacles along the way. It is not a trip you can make out of simple curiosity."

Maryele had analyzed the situation well.

Before the Catastrophe, players were free to roam around the Japanese server, some stronger players

even made expeditions to Korea or China.

This was because of the intercity transport gate within the 5 major cities and the Fairy Rings together with online guides provided them with a convenient and instant transportation tool.

There was also no concept of camping outdoors when this was just a game. No matter how far you were going, you could just log out at a safe area or use 'Call of Home' to return to a city.

"Wait a minute, if you use 'Call of Home'... Ah, I forgot the crucial point."

"That's right, if a player enters a city with a cathedral, the checkpoint for 'Call of Home' will be updated accordingly. If Serara uses 'Call of Home', she will just warp to Susukino... She won't return here."

'Call of Home' was an instantaneous transport spell every player could use in Elder Tales, warping you to the last of the 5 major cities you had visited. The casting time was several minutes and could only be used once every 24 hours, not suitable for use during battles. For the game, it was normally used when the player decided to call it a day and returned to the city before logging out.

But the young girl would just return to Susukino after casting this spell, which was her current location. And the intercity transport gate was still not functioning.

You wouldn't know the destination of the Fairy Rings without checking the online guides, so it could also not be used.

"Why are you mounting a rescue now?"

Akatsuki had finally started on the main topic.

Shiroe expected this to be the core question.

"Because..."

"Ah, because, erm... We were planning to bring her back, it's scary to be alone in the northern border, correct?"

Henrietta wanted to speak, but something was holding her back, and her arms gripped Akatsuki stronger. Maryele who had interrupted her seemed to be carefully choosing her words when explaining.

"... Mary-nee."

"Don't look at people with your sharp eyes, Shiroe, you won't be popular with the ladies if you do that, alright?"

"Mary-nee."

Maryele seemed to be changing the topic, so Shiroe asked her again.

"Eh... yeah, the security in Susukino seems to be worse than here. Ah, forget it, it's not 'seems like' or 'appears to be'. The security in Susukino is definitely bad... Serara is being harassed by nasty guys."

In this girly room with the pastel pink decor, her words sounded foreboding.

The city was a non-combat zone.

Offensive weapons and magic were prohibited, confining or trapping another player character was also banned.

But not all crimes were against the law, and even such crimes could still be carried out. But there were some things that were nastier than PK for a low level girl.

Things that didn't exist in the programming of the game weren't restricted by the developers, but it might be possible to carry them out in this alternate world.

"..."

Akatsuki's intimidating silence came from her correctly grasping the meaning behind 'harass'.

"Ah, it's not that bad yet. But Susukino has less than 2000 players, so it's hard to hide in the city with such a low population, right? She is also guild member, so we need to rescue her, correct? It's embarrassing, but I want to discuss something with you, we have many kids in our guild, right? They are all good kids, but not too reliable yet. We need to send our best players out, or we won't make it to Ezzo. So while we are away, could you help me... look after the kids here?"

"You don't need to spend all your time here, we have a sorcerer Aizel, right? The tall boy with blue hair. He will lead the rest of the children. Marie, battle team leader Shouryuu and myself will do all we can for this expedition. It is a willful request, and we are anxious about this too... But Shiroe-sama, Naotsugu-sama... Akatsuki-chan, can you take care of this guild for a short while?"

Maryele and Henrietta lowered their heads pleading for their assistance.

Shiroe looked at the two ladies bowing before him.

He held his breath.

His mind became silent.

But it was still noisy.

He wanted to stop his blood from flowing if possible.

His mind turned furiously.

His focus called forth lightning from the darkness.

In the real world, Tokyo and Sapporo were 850km apart, which was 425km under the Half-Gaia project

in this world. Maryele's party would be traveling by horse and foot, some of the roads were still serviceable. But most of the zones consisted of uneven plains and hills.

Under the best condition, they could move about 50km per day, but it would be a blessing if they managed half of that every day. No, considering the fact they would be facing monsters, getting 25km would be a challenge.

If they moved 20km per day, they would reach Susukino in 21 days. A round trip would take a month and a half. Maryele was too optimistic about this.

His body temperature dropped about 3 degrees.

The instincts that supported Shiroe came up with a view.

A view akin to a premonition.

Maryele's journey would fail.

They prepared as well as they could. They were a bit lacking in levels, but they were taking on this challenge with the elites of Crescent Moon Alliance. They would be forming a full party of 6 with an excellent healer coming along.

But Shiroe felt this was an issue beyond the dimension of levels.

Shiroe was an introvert, and people said he overthought things.

This usually meant delusional thoughts that went all over the place, regardless of boundaries. But Shiroe had a balance scale in his heart as a secret weapon. Shiroe would use this device to ruthlessly measure the strength of his allies.

Shiroe considered the suggestions he could give Maryele.

There were 12.

He analyzed each of them.

About half of them were useful.

They could shorten the time needed or improve their chances.

Using the eliminated ideas to think of new proposals, he came up with 4.

He went through the plausibility of carrying them out.

He struck off half and added in new elements to the remaining proposals and recalibrated them. The path of his thoughts was like a flash of light leading into the domains of subconsciousness. Shiroe could only feel his thoughts by following the path of light.

(But...)

Advice? Proposals?

Did they want such things? No, did he have the authority to push his ideas on them in the first place? He couldn't take on the responsibility, did he have the right to hold such expectations?

Calculation... Practicability... Authority... Expectation.

That's right, expectation.

What was he hoping for? What did he want to do?

As his thoughts evolved slowly into words of this extent, Shiroe's consciousness returned to his body. He raised his gaze as if directed by something and saw Naotsugu and Akatsuki nodding their heads in show of support.

"Say it, Shiro."

"Your turn to speak, my lord"

If he would think about it another 5 seconds, Shiroe wouldn't be able to move. He would be lost in his thoughts and responsibilities, falling into the trap thinking 'It is arrogant to involve myself in the affairs of another guild'.

But the Shiroe in this moment was like a sailboat pushed forth by the wind of his companions Naotsugu and Akatsuki. He said naturally:

"We will go."

"Hmmm?"

"The best option is for us to go."

"We can't possibly trouble you to do that, Shiro-bou!"

Shiroe decisively ignored Maryele's objection as he turned to face his comrades.

"Of course!" "Leave it to us and my lord."

The two comrades answered with perfect timing. Naotsugu and Akatsuki stood up as if the debate was over.

"We will go on this expedition, Marie-san and everyone else will stay here. Asking us to take care of the kids is impossible."

"A shinobi does not know the word 'failure'."

Maryele sat on the couch stunned with her mouth open looking at Shiroe. Shiroe was unable to look straight at her.

This was embarrassing. Shiroe regretted saying something so arrogant like 'The best option is for us to go'. There should have been a better way to put it, right? Maryele was definitely dumbstruck. Shiroe blushed deeply as he thought about it.

(She has the look that says 'What is this child saying?' What, what am I doing? I'm acting like an arrogant fool!)

He was left with only the embarrassment of acting cool. Shiroe who was seeing stars suppressed his emotions and said with conviction:

"We ride at dawn. Maryele, Henrietta, leave this to us."

CHAPTER.



DEEP IN PALM

[パルムの深き場所]

▶ NAME: MARYELE

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: ELF

▶ CLASS: CLERIC

▶ HP: 10768

▶ MP: 9360

▶ ITEM 1:

[EUCHARIST SAINTS ROBE]

ALSO CALLED THE "HOLY COMMUNION". MAGICAL CLOTHES WHICH HAD WINE POURED ON IT TO SYMBOLIZE THE BLOOD OF THE SAINTS, GAINING BLESSINGS OF THE DIVINE PROTECTION FROM THE SAINTS. IT HAS RESISTANCE AGAINST ABNORMAL STATUS AND RECOVERY MAGICS ARE STRENGTHENED. REQUIRES PRODUCTION-CLASS ITEMS FROM A BREWER.



▶ ITEM 2:

[TEAR OF THE AFFECTIONATE MOTHER]

PENDANT OF AMBER PAINSTAKINGLY CRAFTED BY ARTISANS ATTEMPTING TO GRADUATE FROM THE BEGINNER LEVELS. SHE RECEIVED A LOT OF THESE FROM THE FORMER NEW GUILD MEMBERS AND KEEPS THEM ALL CAREFULLY.



▶ ITEM 3:

[SERAPHIM OF HEARTH DEITIES]

A LUMP OF CHARCOAL THAT GIVES OFF A FAINT RED GLOW. IT IS SAID TO BRING THE DIVINE PROTECTION OF THE GOD OF FIRE. WHEN THE OWNER OF THE LANTERN PRAYS, IT IS POSSIBLE TO PRODUCE LIGHT AND HEAT LIKE THAT OF A BONFIRE. A CONTAINER IS REQUIRED TO CARRY IT AROUND.





〈香水〉
モチアイテム。モチないニヒも
確認するためにも有効。

Part 1

"Is this really okay?"

Maryele who had come to see them off asked yet again.

This was Ueno Log Castle, a zone where demihumans and bandits roamed at night. Right now it was a scene of beauty with the sky slowly turning white through the mist.

The humid morning air surrounded Shiroe's team, Maryele and the several Crescent Moon Alliance members who had come to bid them farewell.

"Marie-san, don't worry about this. That girl is cute, right? I won't let any guy touch her before I hit on her myself, hitting on girls expedition festival!"

Naotsugu's words that, in a sense, seemed flirty, were rewarded with an elbow by Akatsuki along with the words 'Shut up, idiot'.

"It will be fine, we are used to camping outdoors and have been training for the past 2 weeks..."

Shiroe reassured Maryele.

The chance of success with the 3 of them was higher than that with Maryele's party. Even though this was a fact, his showy action last night had been really embarrassing, and Shiroe still hesitated to look directly at Maryele.

"Erm... This is nothing much, but please eat this on your way there. Shiro-senpai, do your best."

"Akatsuki-chan, this is healing salve made by the guild members, take care on your way there."

Shiroe and Akatsuki accepted the sincere support items prepared by the Crescent Moon Alliance members. Although Shiroe only said a simple word of thanks while Akatsuki nodded, their feelings were successfully conveyed to the Crescent Moon Alliance guild members.

"Do take care as well Mary-nee... especially with the PK."

"Yeah, we will be fine here and will continue to collate data."

"Marie-san, take it easy and leave this to us!"

"Ahahaha, be safe Naotsugu-yan, alright? Shiro-bou doesn't need it, so I will let Naotsugu-yan touch them. Look here, they are really soft!"

Maryele smiled to hide her embarrassment and hugged Naotsugu's arms with her hefty breasts.

"Eh, time out, Marie-san!"

"What is it, Naotsugu-yan hates this just like Shiro-bou?"

"That's not it..."

Maryele was like a bold and candid big sister who took care of others and liked to pull dirty jokes to hide her embarrassment. She declared that her character was unladylike and laughed as everyone ignored her when she pulled dirty jokes like this.

(But I think only Mary-nee considers herself to be unpopular...)

Shiroe glanced at Akatsuki and saw her covering her mouth with both hands and mumbling 'Idiot, idiot, die pervert Naotsugu'.

The members of the Crescent Moon Alliance just smiled sheepishly without stopping her. This was probably an everyday occurrence.

"Is it fine? Is this chest worthless?"

"Hold up... If it's thrown in my face, I will be afraid to accept the offer... Ah, really, me helping has nothing to do with this! Didn't I prohibit any dirty jokes!"

"That is totally unconvincing when Naotsugu says it."

Akatsuki kicked Naotsugu.

The blow was shielded by the heavy armor of the Guardian, only leaving a dull thud. Naotsugu used this chance to break away from Maryele.

"I will let you have your way with my breasts when you come back safely... Yeah, *bon voyage*, thank you for doing this, take care of yourself."

After hearing this, it was time to go.

The blushing Naotsugu who had broken free from Maryele was already walking down the foggy street to hide his embarrassment.

"Shiro-bou, Naotsugu-yan, Akatsuki-chan, please bring Serara home."

Naotsugu turned around with his back to the rising sun and lifted his shield up high.

Shiroe waved goodbye while Akatsuki drew her blade half an inch and slammed it back into the hilt, making a clear sound.

The trio bade their farewells and started their journey to the distant north.

Part 2

The morning mist was a temporary scene in the early summer, which turned back into a bright blue sky soon after fading.

The three of them walked on the half-ruined highway. In ancient times (which was the modern era in the real world), it was known as the grandest highway of the capital. The highway that was like a bridge over land extending far into the north.

Looking back from the capital highway, the zones they had passed through were relatively peaceful. There was more wildlife than monsters out here, you could see herds of deer and bears taking a leisurely stroll.

The players believed the world of Elder Tales was set thousands of years into the future of the real world so much that it was akin to the official setting. According to the Elder Tales lore, there had been a war so grand it had literally shattered the world. And the world was now rebuilt into its current state by the miracle of the gods. This was a common world building setting seen in fantasy games.

The graphics that improved with each new expansion enchanted the players with its beauty. But after the Catastrophe, the scenery they saw with their eyes was beyond that of any rendering machines.

The trio had no problem riding, even though they had zero experience doing that. Horses were a common mode of transportation in Elder Tales.

All players could ride a horse without any practice. A horse could be purchased or rented for a few days from shops. It was normal for mid-level players to have their own ride.

Horses were treated like summon creatures when Elder Tales was just a game.

You obtained a flute after buying or renting a horse. You could summon the horse by blowing the flute in any place.

This setting was recreated in this world. Your horse would run to you from far away when you whistled for them so you wouldn't need to tie it down and worry about your horse when raiding dungeons.

Horses were classified as items in the game and would not die, but this had yet to be confirmed in this world. You might lose your horse if you called for them in dangerous places, so Shiroe had not experimented and confirmed this aspect.

Shiroe's group would be traversing through field zones for this journey. As the name implied, they were open and vast areas in this world.

This world basically consisted of interconnected field zones. There were some buildings in good condition that were considered individual zones, but ruins and abandoned buildings were usually part of the field zone's background.

One of the features of field zones was their vague boundaries.

Enclosed zones were connected to others by doors, cave entrances, and stairs. But field zones had no clear entry points to move between neighboring zones.

You would cross over to the adjacent zone by walking over the zone boundary. So being in which zone was not a concern when traveling over open land.

You could check which zones you were in by opening the status screen if you wished.

The highway the trio was traveling on was in a state of disrepair, debris and collapsed sections were everywhere.

They had to traverse some parts by horse. The trees engulfed so much of a section that it was practically a forest. They had no choice but to go through the dense undergrowth instead.

They decided to rest just a short while past noon.

The flyover highway merged with a wide road after rounding a complicated curve in the sky. The asphalt under their feet was alarmingly weak, it would be dangerous to go this way any further.

"Shall we take a lunch break?"

Naotsugu who was leading the way sighed deeply at Shiroe's suggestion.

"It's nice that riding a horse is automatic, but my butt still hurts."

"That's right."

Shiroe nodded in agreement while Akatsuki stared with a questioning look asking "Does it?"

The height difference between Shiroe and Akatsuki was about 30cm, Shiroe estimated her weight to be about half of his. Being so much lighter would place less burden on her lower body while riding.

"I wonder how far we went."

"It's only been half a day, you are too hasty, stupid Naotsugu."

Naotsugu remained nonchalant despite Akatsuki's words. They were used to this type of interaction, a way of bickering and playing around.

Shiroe led them down the slope made of collapsed sections and debris of the highway. This was probably a residential area in ancient times, but only the remnants of telephone poles were left, a wasteland without any trees.

On the reddish undulating ground, they found a boulder suitable to be used as a table to rest.

They lay a cloth on the surface of the rock and placed food, canteens, tools and a map on top. This was a map of Japan labelled with names of zones Shiroe still remembered.

"Where did you find that, my lord? That's a really nice map."

Just as Akatsuki saw, the map was really detailed and worthy of praise.

It was about 1 square meter in size when fully opened, with a drawing of an archipelago similar to Japan... the zones under the jurisdiction of the Japan server of Elder Tales.

The map was drawn with 4 colors labeling rivers, forests, and even villages, not something an amateur could draw.

"My subclass is Scribe, this is a map I copied off the Akiba library."

"I see... Nice job, my lord."

"Well, where are we?"

Naotsugu asked as he opened his canteen.

"We should be around here."

Shiroe pointed to the north of Tokyo, very near Akiba.

"We didn't go very far yet."

"Oh well, it's only been half a day... we'll make better time flying in the afternoon."

"Roger."

Naotsugu chatted with Shiroe as they started digging into a basket of soggy crackers that looked like chicken sandwich.

Akatsuki usually kept out of such conversations. Shiroe recently thought she acted this way because she trusted them completely, not because she was disinterested. Since she didn't ask any questions, that meant she understood the contents of the conversation.

The horses grazed on the dry brown grass as the trio had their meals. They ran off into the distance after some time. The horses would leave by themselves a short while after you dismounted.

They would be back when they blew their flutes, so the three were not concerned about them.

"... Will it always be like this?"

Akatsuki asked as she took small bites out of her chicken sandwich.

She looked far off into the distance, straight at the depths of the untamed lands. She had filtered the contents of her mumbling and you would miss it if you didn't pay attention.

But Shiroe could empathize with her.

This world had recreated the settings of Elder Tales wonderfully, but Elder Tales was a game, not a journey to experience an alternate world. There was no sleep or pain in Elder Tales, and this world was not a game.

It inherited the settings and logs of Elder Tales, but Shiroe believed they should treat this as a totally different alternate world. Since the first day of the Catastrophe, Shiroe had felt a deep sense of unease, telling himself it would be a big mistake to mistake this world for Elder Tales.

(Everyone forgot about something important and wants to move on without confirming it. But no one knows what is really happening. Even if this is really related to Elder Tales, this is still an alternate world... That's why everybody is acting so strangely.)

Security didn't really turn bad.

Saying security was turning bad seemed to imply security was good before, which was not true. If you treated this as an alternate world independent from Elder Tales, then security did not exist in this world in the first place.

The non-combat zones were the only places that were close to being safe. This seemed to be a shallow sign to prove that the Elder Tales' settings still existed.

But this restriction was not the same as laws.

There was no security in the first place, so it couldn't have deteriorated.

This was a lawless world.

Akatsuki understood this point.

But she still talked softly to herself, even though she understood.

Were her emotions wavering in the depths of her serious eyes?

(I can't tell...)

Shiroe couldn't see through Akatsuki's thoughts.

It might be unease, homesickness or even despair. But if you searched in Shiroe's heart, he thought you would find frustration.

This was the reflection of his heart.

The irritation that things turned out this way. The subject when she said 'Will it always be like this' was this world, but it could also refer to 'us'.

(Is this the best we can do? Are we being looked down on? We are killing each other, racketing, crying

and despairing over trivial things. Are we being treated like brats?)

This was a question for himself. Would we immediately turn into backstabbing villains when thrown onto a lawless plain?

Shiroe answered firmly because he understood this:

"No, it won't."

He would not fall into despair so easily.

Like the rotten fruits falling to the ground, the world was following this natural order and turning cunning, cheap and unsightly. It was moving away from nobility and gallantry which was a bad thing. Shiroe didn't accept this natural evolution of the situation.

"That will be too boring."

Naotsugu commented curtly.

"..."

Akatsuki looked towards the horizon.

Shiroe decided to take over Maryele's quest by himself because their chance of success was higher than that of Crescent Moon Alliance's team based on their levels and familiarity with battles.

This was just one of the reasons.

But this reason was more of a 'want', not a 'need'.

The Crescent Moon Alliance was an independent guild no matter how good their relations were. Shiroe's party had no obligation to spend so much time risking countless dangers to do this on their behalf.

This was something that was normally impossible.

Maryele requested Shiroe to occasionally drop by and look after her guild because she understood this. She probably thought it was the limit of what she could ask of Shiroe as a good friend. This was a deduction made from common sense, Maryele was not wrong.

Naotsugu and Akatsuki also knew they had no moral duty to aid Maryele's comrades.

But Shiroe wanted to take on this quest.

Logic and calculations were important, he even held his breath when thinking through this mission. But his will was mainly driven by a sense of frustration. Shiroe was also surprised to have unearthed such strong emotions. And Shiroe was glad that his companions felt the same without putting it into words.

... That was too boring.

... Too unsightly.

(Although such embarrassing words were uttered...)

The wind brushed his cheeks that heated up when he recalled the event. He could feel joy, unease, and bliss within his undulating emotions.

It was a sense of resistance, he wanted to resist this unsightly world.

If that were the case, he shouldn't hold anything back.

To do the best within his abilities.

To work hard in this environment of his.

As Shiroe was distracted with such thoughts, Naotsugu tapped his back.

"You would help if your family is sobbing, right? That is common sense. Even if those guys are unsightly, we have no reason to dance to their tune."

Shiroe didn't want to accept that he had drifted into an unsightly, dull, and boring world beyond redemption. There must be something cool and flashy like the Debauchery Tea Party out here.

It was embarrassing to express it in words, so Shiroe tried not to think about it. But he could feel that a quest like this was the answer.

These were the 'Things they should be doing'.

"Really, harassing a girl like this is unromantic. You need to do it more like this! Try to grab their attention."

Naotsugu's speech threw the whole atmosphere off.

"Well, what types of girls do you like, Naotsugu?"

Akatsuki gave Naotsugu a condescending look while Shiroe resisted joining this conversation. These pubertal thoughts were extremely awkward for Shiroe.

"My range is wide, like maids and nurses. Nah, it has to be my junior, right? After joining the workforce, the clean and pure juniors joining my company look so blindingly bright. They will even call me 'senpai'. That is very important!"

"The basics are important! Teamwork is built on the fundamentals of practice!"

Shiroe didn't really understand what Naotsugu was implying, but he decided to answer Naotsugu loudly with conviction. Akatsuki's glares poked painfully at him.

"You are absolutely right, teamwork, tactics, and terrain are all important. Getting angry at guys when their panties are seen while climbing the stairs. They are the one exposing and blaming us. That is really the strongest."

(That's not being strong, just a nasty excuse, right?)

Even if that was what Shiroe thought, he wouldn't express it to Akatsuki. She nagged at him anyway saying, "Ignoring that idiot Naotsugu, my lord needs to act like a proper lord. Stupid lord."

Part 3

... Akatsuki was giving them the cold shoulder after that conversation. She was stopped by Shiroe when she was about to summon her horse after lunch. Akatsuki was puzzled as Shiroe took out a bamboo flute with elegant carvings.

It looked like a piece of art, even though it was just a horse summon flute. Naotsugu had the same flute in his hand.

"What is that, my lord?"

Shiroe smiled at Akatsuki's question and blew the flute while facing the sky. The sound harmonized with Naotsugu's flute and was carried across the plains by the wind.

"Could this be...?"

A high pitch cry interrupted Akatsuki. Two huge shadows drew near with the deep sound of flapping wings. The creatures as big as a carriage circled twice above Shiroe's party before landing strongly, bowing their heads at Shiroe's and Naotsugu's feet.

"Those are griffons!"

The mythical beasts standing before them were griffons. A griffon had the head, forelegs, and wings of an eagle along with the body of a lion. Its battle prowess differed by variety and age, but was mostly on par with chimeras.

"Well, yeah."

Shiroe rubbed the neck of the griffon a couple of times and took some raw meat from his bag. He bought these from the market at a cheap price since they were ingredients that could be easily hunted in the wild.

"You didn't really think we were going by horse to the far north, did you? We would get old by the time we arrive."

Naotsugu teased Akatsuki.

"Why did you summon these monsters... we're riding them?"

"Yes, we are riding them. What is it, Akatsuki-san?"

"It's Akatsuki."

Akatsuki made a strong request when she heard Shiroe. Even though he had been addressing Akatsuki this way all the time, she still wanted Shiroe to call her by her name.

"Akatsuki... You'll ride behind me. Okay?"

"That's fine, however..."

Akatsuki watched the griffon fearfully from afar. Naotsugu prepared the saddle on his griffon expertly as Shiroe fed his griffon while scratching its ears.

"I have heard of summon flutes like those... That they're only given to players who've beaten the Hades Breath raid on the Fields of Death."

"Yeah, a long time ago..."

Shiroe answered Akatsuki.

This was one of the legacies of the Debauchery Tea Party that was gradually forgotten by the masses. Shiroe and Naotsugu obtained these flutes from the deepest part of the Spirit King's grave. They fought a fierce battle with the four horsemen of the king in front of the magic altar that desecrated the secrets of life.

The Spirit King attempted to steal the underground energy of the elf mountain to gain eternal life. The 'King of Winged Beasts' who fought alongside them to stop the Spirit King's plan presented these flutes as a symbol of their friendship.

"Why do you have these flutes?"

"It's a great party trick to surprise people with, right?"

Naotsugu answered Akatsuki this time.

(This is sort of embarrassing.)

They didn't mean to hide it, but taking these flutes out was still kind of awkward for Shiroe and Naotsugu. 'Griffon Flute' was a rare item that made others envious. No matter how precious it was, it still served mainly as a memento.

"Bind the sheath of your sword tighter, same with your bag. Keep everything that might be blown off by the wind."

Shiroe extended his hand out to the hesitant Akatsuki.

After hesitating a while, Akatsuki reached for Shiroe's hand. But she noticed something and started to blush.

As Shiroe was starting to feel awkward, Akatsuki mustered up her courage and grabbed his hand.

Shiroe pulled Akatsuki up with just the strength in his arm. He was not sure if she jumped or her weight was light, but the feather-light feeling surprised Shiroe.

"All set?"

"Yes my lord, no problem."

Akatsuki's fidgeting figure behind him made Shiroe look back uneasily.

"Sit tight and hold on firmly. Hold on strongly if you are afraid. Wait, don't grab my stomach!"

Naotsugu, who had been holding back, burst out in laughter looking at Shiroe and Akatsuki's interactions. Ignoring their accusatory eyes, he patted his griffon's neck.

"I'll go first!"

Naotsugu's sentence was followed by a gust of wind, and Naotsugu and his griffon became a shadow in the sky.

"Really... You ready, Akatsuki? Let's go!"

It felt like being thrown into the sky or falling head first into the ground far below. Akatsuki endured this feeling as she held on to Shiroe's slender back.

Shiroe's back was lean like that of an old scholar. Akatsuki buried her face in it, hiding her eyes from the surrounding view. But she regained her composure to look around after a moment.

"It's a great view."

Shiroe was deeply concerned about Akatsuki who was grabbing his back tightly and told her softly. Akatsuki was too small in stature after all. The young girl who was only about Shiroe's shoulder or even chest height might fly off with the wind, which worried Shiroe.

Instead of sitting behind, she would be more stable in the front. But doing it this way might scare off Akatsuki in another way.

(Another problem will be where I can hold on to Akatsuki.)

After analyzing in his head, the answer would be to grab the reins with his right hand and hold Akatsuki by the belly or chest with his left hand. But he would risk touching sensitive parts of her body, which made him bleed cold sweat. It would be fine if Naotsugu laughed at him, but being pushed off the griffon in mid flight would be bad.



"You doing okay?"

"Yeah... This is amazing, it's like we're floating in the sky, my lord."

The griffon tore through the air.

It was not flapping its wings, simply gliding steadily in the wind.

The air current was split to either side like the flow of a river, alternating between rising and falling. The griffon might have the instincts of birds, choosing the suitable currents and climbing up the stairs in the sky.

Naotsugu's griffon was flying beside them like a sapphire in the sky, shimmering in the sun.

"Isn't this great!"

Instead of bragging, his words felt more like the pure joy of flying. Akatsuki who usually treated him like a childish companion couldn't help but smile when she saw his grin. It was a rare smile, just like a blossoming flower.

"It's amazing... This is amazing, the sky is so blue and clear."

Shiroe with his eyes in front smiled warmly.

It was true.

Flying through the sky was a unique sense of happiness.

Part 4

"... No signs of any enemies ahead."

"Let's advance."

Shiroe answered with a gesture after hearing Akatsuki's report.

This was Deep in Palm, which passed under Tearstone Mountains. It had been 15 hours since they entered the dungeon.

Referencing the map Shiroe drew from memory, they had traveled about 20km in a beeline.

Shiroe visited this place when Elder Tales was still a game, but he did not know this place was so vast.

It had been 3 days since they set off from Akiba.

The trip had been smooth and peaceful.

Griffons were 3 times faster than horses in terms of speed, but the ability to ignore obstacles meant they were 10 times faster overall.

The ability of the griffons had been nerfed, so it could only travel 4 hours a day. But they still managed to complete a 2 week journey by horse in 3 days.

But their speedy travel reached a bottleneck.

They already anticipated this, and they confirmed Tearstone Mountains was a nest for iron tail wyverns when they arrived. Wyverns were a type of demi-dragons, they were similar to dragons without forelegs and the ability to use magic. They were considered the scrub of dragons.

But they were still tough enemies.

Dragons had the highest stamina, defense, speed, and attack among monsters. Some possessed immense intellect and could cast spells. Just like in most fantasy stories, dragons were amongst the strongest enemies Adventurers could face.

Even a scrub like a wyvern was still a type of dragon.

They couldn't use magic, but their tails were as strong as steel, and their razor-like wings made them as fast as griffons.

Shiroe's party consisted of top class players and could take a single wyvern on the ground easily.

But they might get overwhelmed if a group of wyverns attacked them in the sky.

Tearstone Mountains had been the nest of wyverns since the early days of Elder Tales, so Shiroe was already mentally prepared for this and did not plan to fly recklessly here.

If they fought without a plan in the sky, they might be able to fend off a few wyverns, but would eventually fall from their waves of attacks.

There was no such thing as a graceful retreat from an aerial battle.

The losers were doomed to fall hundreds of meters to their deaths.

Shiroe's team that hid on the ground to avoid this trap had 4 options.

They could go the long way by the sea route or bash through the forest in the mountains. They could also advance through Palm's tunnels under Tearstone Mountains made from ancient sewage systems. The last option would be to climb the mountain directly.

Shiroe's group decided to challenge the tunnels after a discussion.

After considering many factors, this route offered the best combination of speed and safety.

After going through the forest and entering the tunnels through the ruins of a work site, they had traveled in Palm for 15 hours. The vast tunnels were built with grey concrete walls, stretching endlessly under the illumination of magic light.

Similar to large sewage systems in the real world, there were narrow pathways that connected 2 major sections. There would be dry and clean smelling square rooms popping up every now and then which seemed redundant.

The intent of the designer and any traces of the users had been lost under years of dust and debris. The deep cavern with slow flowing water was now ruled by the ratmen.

Ratmen.

They were low in class among the many demihumans in this world. Their appearance was a cross between rat-headed men and rats standing on their hind legs. They were about the height of middle-schoolers, but it was hard to tell their shape with all their fur. They were covered all over in wet-looking fur and could use simple tools.

Ratmen were no threat at all for high-level players like Shiroe. The ability of each unit varied, but most of them were weaker than goblins or beast men.

But the ratmen had 2 troubling weapons; their numbers and the plague.

Just like real world rats, ratmen had powerful reproductive abilities, living in small confined areas in large numbers.

Shiroe's group had already stumbled across rooms several square meters in size with 20 or so ratmen nesting inside.

Normal creatures would run away if they instinctively felt their enemies to be much stronger than them. It was the same with ratmen, who could sense that Shiroe's group was powerful.

Shiroe's group did not have any proper battles on their journey thus far, proving this point. The objective of this quest was to save the girl named Serara, so Shiroe had avoided any unnecessary battles and exploration as they rushed to her. The monsters avoiding them were a good thing for this mission.

But for the numerous ratmen trapped in a confined space with no escape route, things would be different.

The ratmen would attack in this situation, even if Shiroe's group wanted to give way to them. A cornered rat would fight desperately.

Shiroe's party knew they would win, but fighting a large group of ratmen wasted a lot of time and would increase their mental fatigue.

Another issue was the plague debuff.

Ratmen could spread diseases, just like in the Middle Ages. Elder Tales recreated this aspect by giving ratmen the ability to infect players with the plague debuff that dealt persistent damage over time.

The ratmen in the tunnel were about level 40.

The harm level of the plague was determined by the level of the ratmen, which was around 40 in this case. This could be easily handled by a mid-level healer, but Shiroe's party didn't have one right now.

They purchased 'Preventive Potions' at the market and already took them, but they could not be used to cure any plague statuses. Even with their large level difference and low chance of getting infected, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"This room looks safe... How about it Shiro?"

"Yeah... You are right, let's take a break. Please stay near the entrance Naotsugu. I will make a routine call to Mary-nee. As for Akatsuki..."

"I will scout ahead."

Akatsuki melted into the shadows without waiting for a reply.

Their roles within the team had been set. Shiroe and Naotsugu detested the idea of a petite girl like Akatsuki scouting alone in the beginning, but Akatsuki was proficient at this, and her pride pushed her to contribute to the team.

The two of them accepted this reluctantly after understanding Akatsuki's view.

Scouting was Akatsuki's strong point, so this division of work made sense. This serious girl played her part with utmost dedication.

Naotsugu dragged a steel box from a pile of junk and sat on it, hugging his sword while guarding the

entrance. He would be ready if any enemy showed up.

After confirming this, Shiroe used the menu in his mind to call Maryele telepathically. Shiroe had been contacting Maryele around this time daily after starting the journey. Maryele understood this and picked up quickly.

"Thanks for the hard work Shiro-bou, how are things?"

"Everything is fine here, we made camp and rested shortly after contacting you yesterday. We entered Deep in Palm this morning."

"To say that, you are in the dungeon right now?"

"Yes."

"That is too fast, you are scaring your oneesan here!"

"Yes."

Maryele's kind greetings gave Shiroe a warm feeling.

He wanted to reply in a kinder way, but that was beyond him. Shiroe continued to answer politely as he thought about this.

Maryele didn't know Shiroe was traveling in a special way... by griffon. The usual means of travel in this world was by summoning horses.

Another way to traverse the land was by trained 'War Boars'. There was news of players in the Chinese server using Dire Wolves as their rides.

Summoners could conjure several mounts such as unicorns to ride, but only high-level summoners were able to summon flying mounts. Normal players would not be able to imagine Enchanters, warriors, and weapon-based classes owning flying mounts.

"To be frank, we would probably have only covered about a quarter of your journey if we had taken on this quest, I am grateful for your help."

"Uh, that aside... How are things on your side?"

"We are in touch with Serara via telepathy."

This was one reason for the periodic contact.

Shiroe was heading to Ezzo Empire to save Serara, but he couldn't contact her telepathically.

You could only contact players on your friend list by telepathy. And you could only add them to the list when they were right in front of you.

In other words, Shiroe's group had no means to contact Serara through telepathy.

"The situation remains unchanged?"

"Yeah, she says she is hiding with that nice guy I mentioned and that she is okay for now."

"I see, that's good to hear. There are still good players there, seems like Susukino is not beyond redemption."

"Yeah."

Serara was targeted by a group of nasty players, forcing her to join their guild through intimidation. She was even confined for a period of time and was almost assaulted sexually. But she managed to get away and was hiding somewhere in Susukino.

The size of Susukino was on par with Akiba, but there were only about 2000 players there, 1/8 that of Akiba. This made each player more prominent.

Take buying food for instance, you couldn't merge with the crowd and do that, so it would be several times harder to remain undetected. Shiroe was worried Serara couldn't cover her tracks with such a low urban population.

But Serara seemed to have found a player willing to aid her.

Shiroe didn't know the details, but Serara only managed to escape from the nasty guild Brigandia with the help of this kind player.

With a player the enemy knew nothing of, there would be no problems buying supplies. With this, the chance of Serara avoiding detection before help arrived was high. With the low population, there would be more ruins and abandoned buildings for her to hide in.

Shiroe breathed a sigh of relief when he thought of this.

"We can't confirm further plans before leaving the dungeon, so I will contact you again after passing through Palm. Tearstone Mountains is the biggest obstacle after all..."

"How do you plan to cross the straits?"

"I will figure it out once I get there."

Shiroe avoided the question even though he had already decided to fly over.

Owning a griffon meant conquering the 'Hades Breath' Full Raid. Raids were the pinnacle challenge in Elder Tales, only a few major guilds were able to complete them. They were then rewarded with the rare item Griffon Flute.

For some people, guildless people like Shiroe owning this rare item was unacceptable.

Maryele, the guild master of Crescent Moon Alliance, knew lots of people unlike Shiroe. At the very

least, all her members knew about Shiroe's quest to rescue Serara.

Although Maryele accepted Shiroe's aid with her usual smile, it was hard to say this was the same for the other guild members. Shiroe was worried that the public's perception of him would change if this news spread.

"You will definitely make it, Shiro-bou."

Maryele's hesitant words made Shiroe smile.

(Mary-nee is definitely pushing herself. She is so tough.)

"We have had no serious problems, we have not even fought much at all."

"Roger!"

"Well then, I will contact you later."

"Great! I will pray to the goddess Yurala on your behalf, say hi to Naotsugu-yan and Akatsuki-chan for me, Henrietta misses her."

Maryele ended the call by mentioning the goddess Yurala which priests talked about in this alternate world.

(So far so good...)

"How is the situation, my lord?"

"...!"

He didn't notice Akatsuki was back when he was focusing on the telepathy call. Shiroe turned and saw Naotsugu taking big bites out of his meal.

"Akiba is the same, Serara is hiding in the urban part of Susukino. No issues so far, let's proceed as planned."

"Affirmative."

Akatsuki took out a large water canteen from her back after answering. The canteens were all the same size, but it looked bigger in Akatsuki's hands.

Shiroe opened his bag and offered some oranges to Akatsuki. In this world where food had no taste, unprocessed ingredients like fruits were precious delicacies that retained their flavor.

Shiroe and the others were using a Bag of Holding, an excellent item that could be loaded up to 200kg. Apart from the bag itself, it could negate the weight of all the items inside it.

This was a well-known item in Elder Tales, and its quality determined the weight and type of items it could carry. Almost all the players had one because of its convenience.

With this bag, you could carry on fighting in the dungeons, even if you were loaded with lots of treasures. You wouldn't be flustered by cumbersome camping equipment, a necessity in this world.

"Can you tell me what you saw? I want to cross reference it with my map."

"Understood."

Akatsuki peeled the orange expertly with a knife as she made her report. The main path was wide enough for two trucks to drive through side by side, so they wouldn't lose their way, but there were loads of side paths that branched out.

They could reach their goal by following the main route, but it was better to make a detour sometimes to avoid a nest of ratmen. Akatsuki's scouting reports were invaluable for this.

Shiroe drew new deviating paths on his map as he listened to Akatsuki.

"Does it look something like this?"

"Yeah, that should be fairly accurate... You really are good at cartography, my lord."

Akatsuki leaned over to inspect Shiroe's map and is impressed.

"This is just like CAD, and my subclass is also Scribe."

"What is CAD?"

"Designs you make on a computer. I do it at my university as an engineering student."

"So you are a college student, my lord?"

"But I am graduating soon." Shiroe nodded in reply. His memories of the real world seemed so distant and unreal now.

"I see, so you are about my age."

"Hmmm?" "No way!"

Shiroe and Naotsugu retorted at the same time.

"Is it that surprising?"

Shiroe felt bad for Akatsuki who was asking so calmly, but he was sure Akatsuki was 3-4 years younger than him.

"Are you kidding us, shrimp? Based on your height you-Puwahh!"

A knee landing on Naotsugu's face cut off his sentence.

"May I kick this stupid Naotsugu, my lord?"

"Didn't I tell you to ask before doing it?"

Ignoring the comedy duo, Shiroe was bleeding cold sweat in his heart. He didn't say it out loud, but Shiroe had been judging Akatsuki's age based on her height.

"Idiot Naotsugu is always nitpicking about height issues."

"It would be sadder talking about bre-Puwahh!"

She used her left knee this time. Akatsuki jumped almost 2 meters, flipped backwards and landed gracefully like a cat.

"... Akatsuki? Please don't murder Naotsugu."

"Since it is my lord's request..."

Akatsuki left Naotsugu while sulking. Shiroe didn't say his thoughts about her age out loud, but he still helped Naotsugu.

"Did you also think I was a child, my lord?"

Shiroe endured the pressure of Akatsuki's glare and commented softly.

"I am not concerned about height... or age issues. This is troubling..."

Shiroe did think Akatsuki was younger, but he didn't treat her like a kid.

This was a world where survival skills were crucial.

A place where you needed to trade blows with ratmen in giant tunnels like this. You would die if you didn't meet the minimum requirement, even if you were a child.

It was the same even in this world without death.

Shiroe recalled the twins he knew recently.

On that day, Shiroe was still with the twins up to the moment the Catastrophe hit. They got separated when Shiroe rushed back to Akiba.

Shiroe saw the twins joining some guild from afar once, but he still worried about their current status.

Shiroe decided to meet them when he returned to Akiba.

"What are you thinking about, my lord?"

"Hmmm? Nothing really."

"That isn't true. Whenever you are thinking, your brow furrows."

"Ah..."

Shiroe objected to Akatsuki on reflex, but she had totally seen through him. Being seen through was embarrassing enough, but Akatsuki continued 'Right here you know? Just like the wrinkles of an old man', which made Shiroe uneasy.

"Hey, what are you laughing at, Naotsugu?"

"Because... Wahahaha!"

Shiroe kicked Naotsugu in the shin.

But Naotsugu's legs were wrapped in armor, so Shiroe's toes hurt from the impact.

The 3 of them moved out after bickering for a while. It was always dark in the tunnels, threatening to crush the trio with its weight.

In the cold humid air unique to such underground dungeons, only the smiles of the three offered some warmth.

Part 5

The first light of dawn bathed the ridge of the mountains in purple light as they came out of the tunnel.

Shiroe's group, which had been spending long hours underground, stretched their backs in the cool and fragrant breeze.

They did not need to bend their backs to traverse the caverns, but the billion tons of rocks over their heads gave them overwhelming pressure.

The sky right now was still dark as the summer sun slowly rose.

"The wind is cold."

Akatsuki jumped onto a boulder which gave her a view of the forest and the ocean as she spoke.

"But it feels great. We are finally through the tough part."

Shiroe followed them up the boulder.

The wind was indeed icy, but the scenery was grandiose. The dark green forest was glowing beautifully from the rose colored light.

As the clouds moved off with the wind, this rose-colored light made the ocean shimmer like a sea of gold.

"Beautiful."

"Amazing."

Shiroe's companions explained everything with these simple words.

Speaking of which, this was the first time.

(We are the first to see this scene. In this alternate world, no other players have traveled to Susukino from Akiba yet. We are the pioneers. When Elder Tales was a game, lots of players passed by here at dawn. But, we are the first ones here. Being the first means...)

... The best part of adventuring was experiencing new things. It made you so tense with anticipation you couldn't stand still.

'Hmmm? What? Don't lose control of your bladder? What's the big deal, this is a happy moment. Are you unhappy? You are happy right? Just look at this gorgeous view, totally worth the effort! Hahahaha!'

Shiroe remembered 'her' words.

'She' had no basis for her overflowing confidence. 'Her' character was built on willfulness, bluffs, and bold words.

But 'she' always knew the correct answer.

If it were 'her', she would treat this scenery as a medal and wear it proudly.

"We're the first ones here."

Shiroe said to his friends with this emotion in his heart.

"We're the first Adventurers in this world to see this."

For the first time, Shiroe accepted this to be an alternate world with his words.

The gorgeous view in front of them confirmed this fact stronger than anything else. Something that was impossible to see in a game. Technology that recreated real life in the virtual world could not display this flowing wind, chilly air, the sound of the trees, and the dawn that was changing every microsecond.

After coming to this world, even as everyone around them fell into a panic, or players disrupted the security due to lack of goals, Shiroe still maintained a certain degree of calm.

He would go to the suburbs, investigate the zones, experiment with spells while battling, and find out what he could or could not do in this world even if it was tedious.

(... I didn't know I was so adaptable. Naotsugu's humor helps me forget my hardships. Akatsuki makes every day livelier, saving the sanity in my heart...)

But that was not all. Shiroe finally understood this now.

The ruins under the ancient trees looked so beautiful after coming to this world, telling him this was indeed an alternate world.

(This is an alternate world, we are Adventurers.)

Akatsuki looked at Shiroe with surprise for an instant, yet in the next moment she nodded with understanding. Naotsugu gave a manly grin and took a deep breath.

"That's right, I've never seen anything so amazing, even in Elder Tales."

"It's our first prize for victory."

The 2 of them cherished the scene in front of them with longing eyes before acknowledging Shiroe.

And in reply, Shiroe faced the sky to the east and blew his griffon summon flute.

CHAPTER.

ESCAPE [脱 出]

▶ NAME: SERARA

▶ LEVEL: 19

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ CLASS: DRUID

▶ HP: 1440

▶ MP: 1489

▶ ITEM 1:
[OAK WAND]

A WAND WHICH ALL DRUIDS BEGIN WITH. ALTHOUGH IT CONTAINS NO SPECIAL EFFECTS, IT IS VERY STURDY. IT IS STRONG ENOUGH FOR A FIRST TIME ADVENTURER TO USE AS SELF DEFENSE



▶ ITEM 2:
[WALNUT BROOCH]

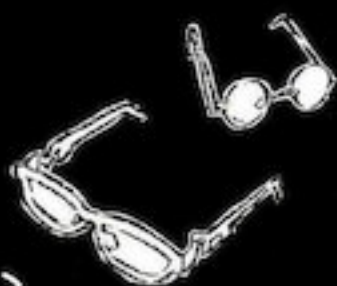
A SIMPLE BROOCH MADE OF A WALNUT. INCREASES DEFENSE SLIGHTLY WHEN WORN BY A DRUID. MALES OFTEN USE IT TO FASTEN THEIR MANTLES, WHILE FEMALES USE IT TO FASTEN THEIR CAPES.



▶ ITEM 3:
[CLEANING SET]

A SET CONTAINING A BROOM, A DUSTPAN, A DUSTING CLOTH, A PAIL, AND THE LIKE. FROM SMALL ROOMS TO LARGE MANSIONS IT CAN BRING GLITTERING CLEANLINESS TO THEM ALL. ITS CAPABILITY IS HIGH EVEN THOUGH IT IS CHEAP, A NECESSITY FOR A HOUSEKEEPER.





くメガネ

視力矯正器具。
一部の趣味の人に大人気になる。

Part 1

Serara was hiding in a composite room made of insulation materials. The 2LDK (2 Bedroom, Living room, Dining room and Kitchen) was situated inside an abandoned building.

The civilization of the old world had been lost after the world fell apart, and you could only see the architectural relics of its culture scattered around the world. Serara as a player knew this world was recreated in the image of modern Japan, with Susukino based on one of the cities of Sapporo. You could see hints of the real world city everywhere.

Susukino was an urbanized place in the world that had many big buildings. They have all been reinforced with cold steel as part of the Elder Tales setting, making them look more like fortresses.

The angular design gave it a retro machine empire feel; this was the design motif of Hokkaido... or Ezzo Empire's settings in game.

The buildings strengthened by screws, braces, nuts and bolts were able to withstand the wind and snow, but not the cold. That's why the people of Susukino would construct additional insulation houses within the buildings, places that were warm and suitable to live in.

This was highly inefficient if you took into account the population and the area available. It wouldn't work in Japan, but was possible in the world of Elder Tales.

One of these insulation houses was the hiding place of Serara, a rental from the person who helped her.

She had been cleaning this home separated into rooms by screen doors all day.

She didn't do it because she liked to clean or because the place was dirty. She just had nothing else to do. In this place with no TV or internet, it was hard to kill time.

Serara's subclass was Housekeeper. This subclass had the ability to clean zones, arrange items, and manage consumables and storage items. These skills helped in keeping a place clean and tidy.

(... Why did I pick such a minor, useless subclass?)

Serara sighed for the countless time but did not stop cleaning.

In Elder Tales, the main class was chosen when creating your character and could not be changed. However, if you were fine with giving up all your subclass EXP, you could change subclasses easily.

Serara's main class was Druid, a type of healer.

Serara wanted to experience the feeling of doing business in this complicated game, that's why she started playing.

There were many players just like her. Interacting with other players and earning cash by doing business

offered a unique sense of fun, it was one of the ways to enjoy Elder Tales.

But most players who wanted to focus on business would choose Merchant or Accountant as a subclass. These subclasses would provide additional benefits when trading, allowing you to get discounts when dealing with NPCs.

Another choice would be a production subclass. Crafting all sorts of items to sell was also a proper way to play.

But according to the beginners' guide Serara had read online, you needed to have certain levels of stats and some quests cleared before you could choose Accountant or Merchant as a subclass. You would need to have some capital on hand to get raw materials if you chose to go the production subclass route.

So Serara was saving up money while raising the level of her Druid main class, and would re-pick her subclass after saving some money. Raising her main class would only help in buying or farming for items after all, so Serara decided to choose the simplest subclass to use in the meantime with this thought in mind.

Simply put, Serara became a Housekeeper through an elimination process.

(Boohoo... If I knew it would be like this, I should have chosen a crafting subclass, such as Artisan or Tailor...)

Serara's mind wandered as she cleaned the table.

The composite room made from insulation parts had a country-style interior.

It wasn't really a style, it was just that things were simply made from wood. The floor was laid with wood that had beautiful grain patterns, and the walls were built with logs while planks covered the ceiling.

According to the game setting, Ezzo Empire was a treasure trove of natural resources, leading the Japanese server with its forestry and mining industries.

The wooden floors and reddish tables were all unique products of Ezzo Empire. They would shine if you cleaned them thoroughly.

In the wood cabin style composite house, the plain girl with her long hair tied in a bunch... Serara was working hard. Her flannel shirt and denim pants, along with her long hair and face without make up, gave the impression of cleanliness and tidiness. She was not utterly beautiful, but looked like a newlywed wife from afar.

(Eh, I'm so bored, I just keep leveling up...)

Serara sighed as she opened the window. Her housekeeper EXP was increasing today too. The EXP for main class and subclass were independent. Subclasses were much simpler in design than main classes, you would level up if you accumulated 10 EXP, and the limit would either be level 90 or 100.

Serara's Housekeeper level was 42 yesterday, but it was 44 now. Recently her subclass had been rising 3

levels every day, an incredible speed. She might max out her subclass while hiding in Susukino.

(I don't want to be a NEET, grinding levels. That would be so sad...)

She had been doing laundry and house chores the whole day, of course her level would increase. But maybe she was not a maid, but a housewife? This thought rose in Serara's mind. This might be a fine title to have for a girl her age, but the feeling of embarrassment was more prominent.

(No way! No way! Maybe I am a maiden waiting for my kitty-husband to come home!)

Serara started polishing the tableware to hide her embarrassment.

This way of killing time wouldn't trouble others and looked very peaceful from the side.

"Serara-san, I'm home nya."

The door opened and an amazing man returned.

This zone was an independent space with monthly rental fees, so only players authorized by the owner could enter. The man entering the house was a werecat.

His slender figure and green corduroy jacket made him look like a middle age rifleman from drawing books. His long limbs accentuated his skinny figure. His round head had a pair of triangular ears on top like a mischievous cat from fairy tales. The whiskers on either side of his face made him look majestic and cute.

He was Nyanta.

A demihuman with cat features from the 8 races available for the players to choose, werecats.

"Welcome back Nyanta-san."

Serara bowed.

"How was the town?"

Nyanta tilted his head slightly and gave a vague smile. His slit-like eyes made her feel at ease, but Serara was unable to see other minute changes in his expression.

"Same as always. It wasn't good, it wasn't bad."

Serara's expression sank at his words. Nyanta said it wasn't bad, but since it hadn't improved, it meant the situation was still atrocious.

Susukino's security continued to deteriorate. With the small population, they could not maintain order spontaneously and it was becoming a dog-eat-dog world.

The main reason for this development was the guild Brigandia. A congregation of notorious people

expelled from Akiba and Nakasu, it had a nasty reputation since the Elder Tales days.

Prioritizing profits, their aggressive style turned them into a real group of bandits after the Catastrophe.

PK was normal for them, and they might not be satisfied with half the items they got from their victims. They would use intimidation and harassment to extort more money from other players.

They were nasty to both players and NPCs.

For many reasons, there was no point for players to mistreat NPCs. Take the city guards for instance, their battle prowess and levels were high and they could fend off normal players with ease.

The NPCs in the field zones like merchant caravans, farmers, and citizens which provided information for the players had low fighting strength but no wealth to speak of.

These NPCs would also provide crucial hints for quests, so normal players wouldn't attack them.

But this group had no qualms bullying the NPCs and ignored the fact that the NPCs had nothing valuable on them... They treated the NPCs as merchandise and started trading them as slaves.

Players were able to employ NPCs in the world of Elder Tales. They were hired for various reasons, but the most common would be to take care of player residences. In Elder Tales where you could purchase a home, talents that managed and cleaned your place had a fixed demand in the market.

Be it renting or buying a zone, the monthly maintenance fee would go up if you didn't clean your place periodically.

Some NPCs with special abilities might not be able to fight on the battlefield, but could serve well in activities such as guild events. It was common to employ NPCs.

One of the reasons Serara's Housekeeper subclass was unpopular was due the job being outsourced to NPCs.

If you hired a NPC maid, you could keep a small mansion clean by only paying 800 gold a month. It was understandable for the Housekeeper subclass to lose popularity.

Elder Tales was just a well-made online RPG. Only a select few NPCs like maids, harvesters, and assistants had unique skills to help the players. You could not employ other normal NPCs.

Their appearances used the same base models as players, but their communication ability was limited to simple computer artificial intelligence. They could say predetermined lines or converse with you through a few select options. They were simply not worth the effort to attack.

But all sorts of common sense was overturned after the Catastrophe.

The game became reality, daily life became a nightmare.

There were many obvious changes after the Catastrophe, with the biggest being the changes of the NPCs. They had an actual soul and body in this world.

Their conversational skills and actions were no different from players.

Unless they had special settings, their battle prowess were miles behind players. But if you didn't confirm through the status screen, it was hard to tell players and NPCs apart.

Another major difference was the number of NPCs.

NPCs were more human-like, with an increase in population. The evil guild Brigandia treated these two facts as ripe fruits to be harvested. The act of selling people as a tool of entertainment started in this world.

This was not a profitable business model in Susukino with only 2000 people. It was just an action that mocked the economy instead of making money.

Even the low-class act of capturing NPCs for sale was just a way to kill time.

Just like the evolution of other foolish ideas, these actions gradually got out of hand. They shifted their focus from tormenting and oppressing people from NPCs to female players like Serara.

Serara turned pale as she thought about this. Her vision dimmed as though a veil was covering her head and her temperature dropped.

If the man in front of her had not come to her rescue, she would definitely be in deep trouble.

"Now, now, don't think so hard about it Serara-san. If you let it bother you, you'll turn old easily nya."

Nyanta waved his hand in front of Serara as he spoke.

"Don't think too much about it, eat some fruits nya... Here eat this."

Serara nodded as Nyanta offered her an apple.

The fragrance from the red fruit made Serara relax.

"This house is so clean. I'm sure Serara-san will make a great wife someday nya."

"That isn't true. Really."

Nyanta sat on a chair by the dining table and commented casually. His words made Serara's temperature rise.

Nyanta referred to himself as an old man.

From the feeling of his voice, Nyanta was much older than Serara. Serara, who was in her 2nd year of high school, would not have been surprised if Nyanta was twice her age.

But even so, Serara didn't think Nyanta was as old as he said. Serara shared this thought with him once and Nyanta replied that the credit should be given to the well-designed characters in the game. But Serara didn't think so.

(Nyanta-san must surely be... a handsome middle aged gentleman. Cool, wise, mature and cheerful.)

Even if this was a game with amazing character designs, Serara felt that appearance didn't really matter when they were playing together. And after the Catastrophe, Serara was very certain of Nyanta's character, since they were living under the same roof (due to emergency situations).

Nyanta gave off the feeling of a dependable and mature man. He wasn't intimidating and Serara felt a sense of security when she was with him. His silver triangular ears were charming like a noble cat, his slender figure was so cool.

(Nyanta-san is so in shape, I look kind of fat being next to him... I am a little overweight...)

Objectively speaking, Serara had a normal build for a woman. But such stunted thoughts formed when she looked at Nyanta.

Nyanta has muscles all over his body, but it felt like he was made from pencils.

"How are those people who are coming for you doing nya?"

Nyanta arranged the items he purchased on the dining table and asked. Crescent Moon Alliance, the guild Serara belonged to, had already sent a 3 man team from Akiba to Susukino for her. Serara and Nyanta both knew about this and it was their common topic of conversation.

Nyanta was impressed by the movement speed of this team. Although they couldn't contact the team directly, Crescent Moon Alliance's guild master Maryele would contact Serara several times daily, so Serara knew their approximate position.

"Yes, they are doing fine, they'll probably arrive before noon tomorrow."

Serara reported.

She wouldn't be able to stay here anymore when help arrived, and would have to go back to Akiba.

What plans did Nyanta have? Serara was afraid to ask.

Nyanta only aided her out of kindness, so Serara wasn't sure how much she could ask of him. She was unable to repay him for all that he had done. But whenever Serara brought this up, he would dismiss it with a laugh, saying 'Helping the young ones is the obligation and joy of the elderly'.

(Even though I am happy he said that... he only treats me like a child after all...)

"Please bear with this a little while longer nya. Serara-san must feel uncomfortable being confined in such a small house, so just endure it a bit more. Relax, help is definitely coming."

Nyanta's smile made Serara miss her chance to ask again.

Part 2

Another day passed.

Shiroe's group had set up their base dozens of minutes away from Susukino for surveillance as scheduled.

Susukino was a city zone located in Ezzo Empire. Ezzo Empire was equivalent to Sapporo in the old world and was set as a field zone.

It was a fortress city with farming zones, and many NPCs resided here.

To be safe, Shiroe found an inconspicuous collapsed house in the suburbs to use as their base, with a view observing the entrance into Susukino.

"There is no need to be on guard right now my lord."

"But there is a fishy atmosphere, this place is lifeless."

Shiroe nodded in agreement with both their assessments and took out a piece of paper from his pocket. It was a rough sketch of Susukino.

"Susukino has one major road, something like this. The uptown area is in the east, the central square is to the east of this place. As for us," Shiroe drew an arrow. "We are going in from the west."

"Can't we meet up outside the city?"

"That's a bad idea shrimp."

"Is that so, pervert Naotsugu?"

They each refused to back down, calling each other shrimp and pervert. Shiroe only soothed them this one time as he explained.

"Our respawn point is in Akiba since that is the last city we visited. If we met up outside and were wiped out in a fight, we would respawn in the Akiba cathedral after some time... but Serara-san would respawn at the Susukino cathedral. So if we meet up outside and get wiped out, we will return to Akiba while Serara-san would stay at Susukino. We will need to start all over, which I want to avoid."

"I understand."

Akatsuki nodded while Naotsugu had a smug 'I told you so' look on his face.

"Next up is our formation. Akatsuki... I would like you to hide yourself with Sneak and Silent Move please."

"No 'please' my lord."

"Eh, I understand... Naotsugu and I with Akatsuki who is hiding her presence will enter the city normally and head to the meeting point, an abandoned building. Akatsuki will find a hiding place with a vantage point covering the whole building. Contact me if you see anything."

The serious girl with black hair nodded with a serious expression.

"Naotsugu will guard the entrance. Try to find a spot that overlooks both the road and the interior of the building. Wait there and be prepared for any emergencies inside. I will go straight into the building, meet up with Serara-san and escort her out to Naotsugu as fast as possible."

"Okay. Eh, what about the third party who helped?"

"I have not ascertained his identity yet, but I hope he will leave Susukino with us. We will leave his decision to go to Akiba until later."

Shiroe thought for a moment before continuing.

"It is highly possible Serara-san is on the friend list of a Brigandia guild member."

Unlike what its name suggested, you did not need approval before adding someone to your friend list. You could determine whether a person on your friend list was online, and you could also check to see if they were in the same zone as you.

"If that is the case, they'll locate her and send pursuit the minute she leaves her hiding spot. The best case will be to leave Susukino before that happens. They probably won't find us if we are two or three zones away."

Serara was currently hiding in an independent zone of a building. Put simply, Serara wouldn't be detected by people who added her to their friend list if she was hidden there.

But if she left and went into the Susukino city zone, they would notice her presence. The group would need to go through the Susukino city zone in order to return to Akiba.

Shiroe had already planned for this on his journey here and explained it in detail to the others. His meticulous formation was playing it safe, but Shiroe didn't think anything would actually go wrong.

But everything depended on how unscrupulous the problem guilds really were. Unlike handling monsters, you couldn't simply attempt the quest again after getting wiped out.

(There are tons of bad scenarios. This is the reason people say I think too much and I am an introvert.)

It wouldn't be a problem if his worries turned out to be for nothing. Shiroe nodded at Naotsugu and Akatsuki as he thought about this.

"If we are fast, we can say goodbye to Susukino in an hour."

"I support my lord's battle plans."

After tying down the hand signals for actions and the meeting points in case of emergencies, the trio

headed for Susukino.

The entrance was designed to look like a reinforced castle gate. Angular braces were bolted to the gate at all angles, giving it an intimidating look.

The young Ezzo Empire was built by the human emperor Al Radiru. In the settings of the Japanese server, it was a strong and warlike nation. Weapons were hung all over the cities and the colorful standards gave off a military atmosphere.

(This is different from Akiba. I visited when it was a game, but seeing it like this is totally different from what I remember...)

The decor, atmosphere, and details of the city that were only the background in the game was a new experience for Shiroe right now. Naotsugu felt the same as he looked around with interest while wrapped in his thick woolen cloak.

The long road led into the city zone.

The NPCs walking in the streets were lifeless and the occasional players they saw had gloomy expressions.

"The atmosphere is terrible, I wouldn't want to live here."

"Yeah."

Naotsugu whispered and Shiroe replied in the same low volume. He sympathized with them, but the feeling of frustration in his heart burned stronger.

He had felt this sensation during his journey here, but he was losing control of it right now. He felt irritated and his temperature rose with his unhappy feelings.

Although he wanted to do something to improve the situation, he didn't have any practical means or the ability.

The wary Shiroe looked behind himself every now and then, but he couldn't feel Akatsuki's presence or location. She must have been nearby, but for her to have erased her presence so completely made Shiroe feel uneasy.

After traveling a distance, he saw an abandoned building with a broken sign saying '-raoke BO-', the landmark building Maryele had mentioned. Shiroe signaled with his hand and entered the building with Naotsugu.

There were steel braces reinforcing the cracks in the concrete walls everywhere. The buildings here looked more structurally sound than Akiba's.

Naotsugu turned right just after entering the lobby and found a security guard post. Shiroe listened intently for any sound as he moved deeper into the building, up the stairs to the 2nd floor.

After contacting Maryele by telepathy, Shiroe was told 'Our guild member will be reaching you soon'. Things had been going as planned so far, which put Shiroe at ease. It had been 6 minutes since he entered Susukino.



"Umm, hello!"

Shiroe turned around casually when he heard 2 sets of footsteps approaching. A young girl wearing leather armor with the rounded silhouette unique to healers greeted him. She had long hair tied back in a low ponytail and looked up at Shiroe with guilty eyes. This, along with her panicky demeanor, reminded Shiroe of a small animal poking its head out of the forest.

Shiroe smiled.

"I am Serara from Crescent Moon Alliance, thank you for coming."

"Nya."

"Wait, is that you Chief?"

Even though it was rude to Serara who was bowing her head in thanks, Shiroe couldn't help retorting loudly.

"Hey, I was thinking who it might be, isn't this Shiroe-chi nya? That explains how you arrived so quickly nya."

This was the man known as 'Chief' or 'Cat Sage' in the Debauchery Tea Party, the Swashbuckler with cat ears... Nyanta.

Part 3

Nyanta was a player that gave off a unique air during his days in the Debauchery Tea Party. He was steady, cool, and had a kind nature.

He could also be described as a sunbathing cat. Anyway, he was the one rare sensible person restraining the playful group that tended to go out of control.

Nyanta referred to himself as an old man and behaved like one with his steadfast maturity.

With voice chat being the main way of communicating in Elder Tales, it was possible to guess someone's age through their voice.

The self-proclaimed old man Nyanta sounded younger than 50, should be a bit older than 40, and was 30 plus years of age at best.

Online gaming was a culture of the young.

There was no surprise in finding players older than 30, but you would be hard pressed to see any over 40. Nyanta probably called himself an old man because of this relative difference in age, which differed from how Shiroe saw it.

In this case, an adult had nothing to do with biological age.

Others thought of Nyanta as an adult because of his character and experience.

'Adult' in this case didn't mean someone who couldn't read the atmosphere and disrupted everybody's playing time. It referred to a person who always had your back and gave you advice when you consulted them.

Nyanta would help any comrade that came to him for advice, but he would not overdo it with his aid. They would pull themselves together after hearing his warm voice and work hard on their problem. This was the reason Nyanta was loved and respected by the younger players.

His nicknames of 'Chief' and 'Cat Sage' were expressions of good will by the other players.

The Debauchery Tea Party was not a guild, it was just a group of players.

Many players there were not in any guild, but some belonged to one. However, big guilds with strict rules frowned on their members being on such close terms with outsiders.

This was not because of discrimination (although it could be), it was just concern about manpower flowing out. For instance, rather than letting the high-level members mentor beginners without guilds or from other guilds, it would be better to teach the beginners in your own guild. Guilds were meant for mutual support after all.

Taking this into perspective, Debauchery Tea Party regulars were either from small guilds or not in one.

Nyanta belonged to the guild 'Cat Food'.

But Shiroe had never seen any other players from Cat Food, so it must have been an obscure mini guild.

Whenever Shiroe asked Nyanta how his guild was doing, Nyanta replied 'I love sitting on the porch, but the house was getting old. Something like that nya' with a smile.

Although Nyanta was the adviser for the Debauchery Tea Party, he was not a man with high authority or status. Shiroe could sense that Nyanta was concerned about how the trend of the Tea Party would affect him.

Nyanta maintained a calm and playful demeanor, but he definitely liked the festive events of the Debauchery Tea Party right? He probably wanted to enjoy himself among the 'young ones'... That's how Shiroe felt.

"Ah, sorry about that Serara-san, please call me Shiroe. I actually know this sage."

"That's right Serara-san, this is Shiroe-chi, a smart and competent young man nya. The plan is sure to work with him here nya."

"I see you still meow all the time Chief."

Shiroe gave a teasing smile.

Making fun of Nyanta's meowing had been a joy of Shiroe since the Tea Party days.

"What are you talking about Shiroe-chi nya? This is the correct way for cat people to speak, a wonderful way to end a sentence nya." [\[7\]](#)

"Is it 'wan' or 'nya', just stick to one okay?" [\[8\]](#)

The light-hearted chat between Shiroe and Nyanta surprised Serara. She calmed herself and asked.

"You know each other?"

"We were very close nya. Shiroe-chi used to check me for fleas."

"I did not."

Serara could only nod with a stunned expression.

"Since Shiroe-chi is here... who are the other 2 nya?"

"Naotsugu is here, the other is a girl named Akatsuki, a level 90 Assassin. We have gone through 10 days and 160 training sessions, she is good."

"Then Naotsugu-cchi is here too nya, and a new friend? This is excellent nya. Shiroe-chi is finally at this

phase nya."

Nyanta, who always squinted his eyes into a slit while smiling, looked at Shiroe with a deep smile.

"Chief Nyanta... What happened to Cat Food?"

"The house couldn't handle the bad weather and half the house caved in nya. Perhaps it is a sign from above, telling me to relocate to Akiba nya."

"That... Ah, wait a minute."

Nyanta's answer sounded more grandiose than sad. Just when Shiroe was about to ask further, a soothing ringtone sounded in his ears.

"A menacing group led by a Monk is approaching the building. They have 3 weapon-based classes and 2 healers, probably in the same party. They are planning to surround you. They will reach you in about 2 minutes."

The concise words brought up the sketch of Susukino in Shiroe's mind.

"Our allies detected a party of 6 led by a Monk approaching, any idea who they are?"

"That's - !"

"That should be the guild master of Brigandia, Demiqas nya. He is a level 90 Monk, so are his teammates nya... He is the mastermind behind all this, the enemy nya."

Nyanta used the term enemy clearly.

He had never addressed any player this way in the game before, which cleared up any doubts Shiroe had,

"Is there a back door here? We will fight our way through if there is a need."

Part 4

"This way nya."

"You doing okay Serara-san?"

"Of course!"

Serara chased after Nyanta, who was leading the way, with the rescue team member Shiroe behind her.

(So he is Nyanta-san's friend... He looks hard to get along with, but seems very smart.)

Serara judged based on Shiroe's sharp eyes.

Peeking behind, she could see Shiroe watching the vicinity while talking through telepathy. His feet were steady and fast, definitely experienced in this.

Brigandia members had started combing through the areas they found suspicious.

They'd probably found her whereabouts through the friend list.

That's what Serara concluded.

It would only be a matter of time before they were found. The layout of Susukino was very simple; all the roads were laid out in a grid like a chess board. No matter what route they took, they would be surrounded if the enemy had sufficient numbers.

Shiroe and Nyanta decided to force their way through even though they knew this.

They said this was a necessary gamble to return to Akiba.

Shiroe was contacting Naotsugu and Akatsuki, who were not here. The three of them moved fast but steadily towards the main road that led west.

The city gate was full of Brigandia members, as expected.

"Fighting is prohibited in the streets of Susukino nya... What are they thinking?"

"They will let us through the first time."

Shiroe mentioned the enemies would give way, but that was just this one time. They would wait until Shiroe's group was outside and then attack. That was Brigandia's plan. Serara was sure Shiroe and Nyanta understood this too.

"That's how it is nya."

Nyanta didn't ask Shiroe further about his bad premonition out of concern for Serara.

But the kind attitude of Nyanta differed from his time with Serara. She didn't know what was different, but it gave her the chills.

"What... Should I do...?"

Serara's voice was trembling. Demiqas had grabbed her wrist once, and Serara lost her courage just recalling his muscular arms and disgusting smile.

"About that..."

Shiroe looked far ahead, and you could see his expression fading from his profile. Shiroe, who looked more unapproachable with his temperature seemingly dropping, scared Serara.

"If they're letting us leave, then we just go. That makes things easier."

"... Eh?"

Serara stared in surprise at Shiroe's words.

Battle was allowed after leaving the city zone.

There would be a fight if they were caught. Brigandia had enough members to guard all the roads out of the city.

Nyanta, Shiroe, and she would be murdered, Serara predicted.

No matter how experienced Shiroe and Nyanta were, or high level their allies might be, there were still only 5 of them. And that included Serara, who was below level 30.

Serara felt there was no way they could win against their foes in PK. The difference in numbers was too large.

"To escape cleanly, we need to create an opening."

"They will pursue us indefinitely if we are in close range. They definitely know someone is assisting Serara-san, or she wouldn't be able to get food all this time. They also know we are few in numbers... Brigandia probably plans to surround and PK us a short distance outside the non-combat city zone. Their priority probably will be the people helping you. That will destroy your will and put you under their control. I am almost certain of that."

Shiroe's pure analysis sounded like a bystander's viewpoint.

"They might kill us? How can you say that?"

"Now, now, don't get so upset Serara-san. There's no need to be so worried nya. If that's what Shiroe-chi says, that's how it is nya. Just leave this to Shiroe-chi and you will be fine."

Nyanta said calmly ignoring Serara's panic and unease. Nyanta had already informed Shiroe about the details of Brigandia's members and their strengths, but Serara still didn't get why the two of them were so nonchalant in the face of imminent danger.

"Chief?"

"What is it nya?"

"If you went 1-on-1 with their leader..."

"A foolish question nya."

Nyanta nodded at Shiroe's query, scaring Serara with his spirit. She had heard from experienced players that PK was different from fighting monsters, and this was the same in the alternate world.

Unlike the limited variety of attacks monsters used based on their instincts, there was no way to tell what other players might do. The tension of battle was several times stronger, and even the most battle-hardened players could make mistakes... That was what Henrietta told Serara.

"Let's do it this way. We will leave the city, and Brigandia will try to PK us at a place where we can't flee into the city. We will defeat their leader and make our escape."

(What an absurd plan!)

Serara turned pale.

That's not a plan, it was just going with Brigandia's flow right? This was a suicidal move in a sense. Serara couldn't put her thoughts into words even though she wanted to.

"No problems nya. You are still the same Shiroe-chi I knew nya."

More incredibly, Nyanta actually agreed with Shiroe. Serara turned around in surprise as Nyanta opened his right eye while replying.

"It's been a while since my last hearty meal, watch closely Serara-san nya. Don't worry, I won't let those ruffians touch you nya."

Seeing Nyanta like this, Serara swore in her heart to endure whatever fear she might face.

Part 5

That was how things had progressed to this stage.

It was going just as Shiroe predicted.

Serara's group walked through the gates under the disdainful look of Brigandia's members. About ten of their people had cut off their retreat route, shadowing them from behind.

They would be attacked a short distance from the city. Even Serara who usually had nothing to do with murderous intents could feel the twisted air, unable to differentiate between malice and kindness. Her trembling shoulders were the best evidence.

(It must be hard for her to trust me.)

Shiroe, who was aware of Serara's worries, thought. She was right in a sense.

Brigandia was a powerful force, so it was understandable for her doubt the possibility of victory.

The tension in the air got stronger with each step they took.

As they got further away from the safety of the city, Brigandia's men started to close in and encircle Shiroe's group.

"Here should be fine."

Shiroe said softly before he raised his voice and asked:

"Which of you is Brigandia's Demiqa~?"

This statement caused a stir among the surrounding players. They had not expected such an open challenge.

"Now, Shiroe-chi, asking something so loudly is rude nya. I know which one he is, he is the excessively huge guy standing over yonder nya. Hey, Demiqa~!"

The man who appeared as if on cue from Nyanta was the guild master of Brigandia, Demiqa.

His light armor that looked like a chest plate covered his muscular body. He was equipped with weapons on his hands akin to tiger claws.

Since he was based off the 3D in-game model, this man should be quite handsome. But his expression rightly reflected the evil in his heart.

"So you two are the flies that have been bothering Serara?"

"That would just be me nya. And it's not a fly, but a cat nya." Nyanta teased without a care in the world.

Unlike the content of his speech, Nyanta used a mature and charming tone, so it was not too intimidating.

But he followed up with some spunk.

"... Recklessness is the way of the young, and tolerance is the beauty of adulthood. But there is such a thing as going too far nya."

"What are you saying, mongrel?"

"What I'm going to say is the main point, listen carefully nya. Demiqas, you have crossed the line. Since you planned to PK, this will save some time. Reigning in children who stray too far beyond the line is also the obligation of elders. Come on, I will fight you 1-on-1 nya."

(Although it is rare for the Chief to taunt someone, it can't be helped since Brigandia is acting like criminals.)

Shiroe checked the numbers of enemies using the menu in his head as he thought.

"Hah! Ridiculous, why should I fight you on your terms? Don't you see my 10 buddies over here?"

"Sorry to interrupt Demiqas-san, but it doesn't have to be you. Instead... I'd prefer you in the gray robes. Isn't that an artifact drop from the Fire Lizard's cave? You seem stronger, so we would be okay with you instead of the Monk. It would be more satisfying for both of us if the strongest fighters settle things. Let's challenge this mage Chief Nyanta."

"You heard of me, Londark of Gray Steel and still dare to say this?"

"You are right nya... Let us finish this nya."

Deviating from the plan surprised Serara, Shiroe had already switched his target to the male mage besides Demiqas. Nyanta seemed to support this, which made the Brigandia members confused.

Some of them looked at the mage Londark, others watched Demiqas for his reaction. Even Shiroe's party could see the divide between the 2 groups.

(They are not united. That is expected since they are a coalition formed on the spur of the moment. The mage Londark is the number 2 man in the guild and Demiqas' tactician. Demiqas, I understand how much control you have over your members.)

Shiroe felt a flame flickering under his calm emotions.

Shiroe was not adept at dealing with others. You could say he hated mingling with idiots, but it didn't mean he 'couldn't' do it.

He was a pacifist towards other players and did not wish to fight them.

But that doesn't mean he 'wouldn't.'

It was the opposite.

Shiroe knew what was coming next.

His emotions were like the sea in a dark night, an urge to destroy fueled by his frustration.

'Eat a hearty meal'.

That's how Nyanta described it. Keeping him warm and sunny, and then replacing it with a cold grin that revealed his cat fangs.

Shiroe had a similar fang in his heart.

If you had the guts to wield a sword, you had to bear the resolve to die by a sword. Shiroe agreed to this concept subconsciously. There was no need for mercy.

"Londark-san of Gray Steel right? You are strong enough to have a nickname, so we would prefer to fight you instead of Demiqas-san... The Swashbuckler Chief Nyanta here will be your opponent. Let's duke this out, we won't run away."

"Let's begin. Judging from your equipment you are a top-class mage nya? Deciding things with a match should be your style nya? We can ignore the cowardly meatball Demiqas here who is too scared to fight himself."

Nyanta's insult was the last straw. Demiqas, infuriated by this, walked towards Nyanta with anger, tension, and a sneer.

"Very well, I will fight you. A reckless bastard like you, I will use my fist and send you to... Heaven!"

Demiqaas pretended to walk up and take up the challenge casually when he lunged at Nyanta. Nyanta waited until the last moment before dodging the fist coming at his face, leaping several meters backwards. He drew his twin rapiers with a stance and laughed mockingly at Demiqas.

"Wow, what a strong punch nya."

"But the hit didn't land, so there is no damage right? That aside, are you fine without your member's support? Demi-something-san."

Shiroe shouted mockingly as Demiqas punched twice more. Demiqas seemed more infuriated and yelled: "You're next, after I slaughter this old cat!"

"Now, now, you need to get past me first nya... I don't want to show the lady unnecessary gory scenes. If you want me to go easy tell me quickly nya."

"Outrageous!"

Demiqaas' next move ignored the distance Nyanta agilely put between them.

His stance akin to throwing shotputs, he threw out consecutive left jabs. Nyanta parried most of them with his rapiers, but several punches still landed with a thud.

In terms of HP, Demiqas had 50% more than Nyanta.

Even if Nyanta dodged most of Demiqas' attacks, the minority that connected were enough to drain his HP.

"How's that?"

Demiqaas approached with a joyous grin.

Demiqaas belonged to the Monk class.

Monks were 1 of the 3 warrior classes, in the same vein as Guardians and Samurai. Warriors specialized in tanking on the front line with emphasis on their defense.

From this perspective, Monks who could only wear light armor were in a league of their own.

In Elder Tales, sword techniques and magic spells were known collectively as skills, each with a unique name and effect. They also had a set mana cost, casting time and cool-down time.

Casting time was the period between selecting the skill and the skill being used, also known as 'gathering mana'. Cool-down time was the time you needed to wait before recasting the same skill again. You could take other actions during this cool-down period, except the spell you just cast. Most powerful spells could not be used in rapid succession.

Take Samurai for instance - all of their skills had long cool-down times, reflecting their battle style of dealing heavy hits.

In comparison, Monks had low cool-down times. Lightning Straight and Wyvern Kick were good examples. Monks were proficient in using basic efficient skills consecutively, chaining their attacks and leaving no time for rest.

In terms of defense, Monks were the weakest with their light armor, but it also gave them the highest evasion. Just like Guardians with their defensive shield techniques, Monks possessed skills which boosted their evasion rate. Examples were Phantom Step that left after-images and Dragonscale Stance that increased defense against fire and ice attacks. The defense of Monks did not come from their equipment, but the evasion abilities of their bodies. Being powerful enough to fight on the front lines without having rare or strong equipment gave Monks a reputation of being an easy-to-master class.

"How's this? Can't even fight back, hah?"

Nyanta finally fended off Demiqas' attack, taking 2 steps back.

But the dark green light of Demiqas covered this distance with his flying kick. He followed up with a multitude of attacks even though Nyanta avoided the kick.

That was Demiqas' Wyvern Kick - a skill that damaged all enemies in a straight line. Demiqas used it as a means to move. He utilized this suppressive and high speed movement to stick close to Nyanta, disrupting

Nyanta's ideal striking distance.

(He's good... Not allowing Chief Nyanta to create any distance.)

Shiroe was secretly impressed.

The Brigandia that was full of internal strife was now standing united. From the looks of things these ruffians were expecting their guild master to win flawlessly.

After dodging a left hook, Nyanta kneed Demiqas' flank gently, jumping into the air with the limited space he created and went on the offensive.

"Nyan nyan!"

The strike that seemed to rip the air apart tore through Demiqas' thigh guard, leaving a wound akin to an ice pick.

Nyanta assumed a new defensive stance as he looked at Demiqas coldly, the tips of his rapiers dancing like a sparrow.

Nyanta was a Swashbuckler, a rare type of melee fighter that dual wields. Their special feature was their fast consecutive attacks using weapons in both hands as well as wide-area spin attacks. In the classes that focused on physical attack power, their strike could not match those of Assassins, but they made up for it with multiple hits. They specialized in hitting fast.

Swashbucklers with different weapons had different fighting styles. Nyanta's style was Twin Rapiers, which was second in attack speed only to Twin Daggers, which were the king of speed.

Another feature of Swashbucklers were the bad statuses they could inflict on others. Lowering attack speed, evasion rate or defense were examples of how Swashbucklers could negate your strength and worsen your weakness with precision.

"I can see your hairy legs nya."

Nyanta's mocking words made Demiqas face turn black and red, but Nyanta didn't give up the initiative. Nyanta's rapiers pierced through Demiqas' limbs accurately, making a crisp sound like a typewriter.

The 4 wounds on Demiqas' arms were Viper Strach, lowering his accuracy for dozens of seconds by slashing his arms.

The 3 hits on Demiqas' legs were Bloody Piercing, hurting the agility of the legs and lowering evasion.

Nyanta used his surgeon-like observation skill and his iron will to carry out his plan of stripping Demiqas' fighting strength. This Nyanta was not the warm and steadfast sage that offered consultation for those in need.

"Wah! Stop jumping around you bastard and fight me fair and square!"

"Coming from you, 'fair and square' sounds like a bastardization of our fair language."

Judging from HP, Demiqas had the advantage with Nyanta down to 30% of his hit points. Demiqas as the tanking warrior class still had twice Nyanta's HP.

But in the eyes of all those present, the tall and slender Swashbuckler was the one in control of the fight.

Piercing strike, parrying and feints, the blade that was thinner than a finger drew silver lines in the air, forming a wall that blocked Demiqas out.

Demiqa no longer had the attack power and speed he had at the start of the fight. His HP and MP drained away with the blood bleeding from his limbs.

The Brigandia members who had felt at ease with Demiqas winning were starting to get rowdy. They were filled with the fear of their leader losing, as well as curiosity and a secretly happiness at Demiqas failing.

Demiqa must have adopted the same strong-arm method in ruling his guild. Some of the members bore the hope that Demiqas would be defeated in front of the crowd.

Shiroe who sensed this atmosphere gave Serara a signal.

Serara, who was clenching her fist so tight the nails were biting into her palms, watched Nyanta's battle carefully. She regained awareness of her surroundings when Shiroe tapped her shoulder. Serara heard the instructions 'When I give the signal, cast a Healing Pulse on everyone'.

As the healer of the party, restoring Nyanta's HP with spells was only natural. Why was there a need to wait for a command? And why was it party-wide healing spells, not just for Nyanta? Serara stared with her eyes wide open as she asked herself.

As she was about to ask Shiroe, Serara heard these unbelievable words.

"Fuck this! Who wants to play this one on one game with you? Healers, restore the wounds on my limbs! Assassin team, surround and butcher this cat bastard!"

Demiqa, unable to take the attacks of the swordsman facing him anymore, commanded Brigandia to attack.

Part 6

This angry roar stopped everyone's movement for a moment.

Even though Brigandia engaged in NPC slave trades, intimidated other players, PK'd people and took other nasty actions, this order still made them hesitate for a moment.

Brigandia was a lawless organization.

But truly lawless individuals wouldn't have been able to gather in a group. Forming a group without any guiding principles would have been meaningless. Lawless people still obeyed the reign of the powerful and violent.

The band of outlaws, Brigandia, was managed through the use of strength. As the head of the group, Demiqas had been wounded all over by the rapier he'd laughed off as a girl's weapon in this one-on-one fight. The attack power he was so proud of had been sealed away as he stood on the verge of defeat.

And when faced with the fact of being wounded, he had barked angrily for aid to destroy the enemy.

'Is it really fine to listen to this order? We will be losers in life if we continue to follow this kind of leader'... Even though they were a lawless bunch, Brigandia's members still harbored such thoughts and hesitated.

(It would be lucky if we could make them uneasy, hesitate, and doubt each other with this.)

But they only hesitated for a moment.

Even though their leader was in a pitiful state, they still needed to keep up their reputation as a violent organization. No, their brand name was doubly important because they were a lawless group. They were able to oppress other players because of Brigandia's reputation of being a powerful and violent group.

They had to keep up the reign of terror, or else they would be the ones who were hunted.

Their feelings were more about the fear of losing their status as the ones inflicting terror rather than their desire to save their leader. All the members decided to seal the mouths of these 3 people. It took them 3 seconds to come to a consensus.

After making this decision, the lawless bunch roared as they swarmed towards Nyanta.

But no one in Shiroe's group wasted these 3 seconds.

Naotsugu appeared like the wind, intercepting the 8 members rushing Nyanta. The Brigandia group's morale did not falter with the appearance of the new enemy as they rushed in with renewed maliciousness.

"Anchor Howl!"^[9]

Naotsugu howled. This was a skill that forced the enemies in the surrounding area to focus solely on him. This was the ability of Guardians, the fortresses of the front line. The 8 Brigandia members stopped in front of Naotsugu as though their feet were nailed to the ground.

"Nyanta-san, if that is the case..."

"Heal everyone now!!"

"Eh, right, Heartbeat Healing!"

Serara used the best skill available to her upon hearing Shiroe's command.

Heartbeat Healing was a skill unique to Druids.

Similar to the Kannagi with 'Damage Intercept' and Clerics with 'auto heal', Druids also had their own special skills.

Spells in the same vein as Heartbeat Healing were persistent restorative magics which remained in effect for a short time. A set amount of HP would be healed over a 10-30 second period. Although the amount healed each pulse was less than that of a normal healing spell, the total HP restored was much higher, which made it an MP-efficient magic.

Furthermore, it also allowed the caster to do other things such as attacking or defending while the healing over time was in effect.

But...

"I can't keep this up, my level isn't high enough!"

Serara cried in pain.

In Elder Tales, the strength of the healers would drastically affect the outcome of battles.

A well-trained healer partnered with a tank could withstand the attacks of 4 other players around the same level.

Serara was level 19. Even with the excellent defense of the level 90 Naotsugu, it was impossible from the start to fend off the attacks of 8 high level Brigandia members.

"Don't worry about our Guardian, focus on healing Nyanta. Calm down and watch our allies' HP. If you can't do something then don't. Focus on doing what you can."

Shiroe said calmly to Serara who was losing her nerve.

His strong words whipped up the strength within Serara. Shiroe told her that what healers could do was heal.

In the battlefield not far from Naotsugu, Nyanta and Demiqas' battle was reaching its climax. The wounds on Demiqas' arms had recovered with the aid of his healers, restoring his original attack strength.

The wounds on his leg remained, but Demiqas was focusing on attacking and had given up on dodging, regaining his composure.

In the end, the warrior class Demiqas was tougher than melee Swashbucklers. With the support of healers, it would become a battle of attrition and he could gain victory through brute force. That was Demiqas' wishful plan.

Although the little girl Druid was healing the swordsman before him, her restorative power would not exceed his damage output.

Demiqas, who was sure of victory, assumed an arrogant attitude.

"What's this?! What can you do with your toy swords? How can a weak fellow like you protect your allies?"

"How rude, rapiers are the weapons of gentlemen nya."

"I'll shut your cocky mouth up! Look, your warrior friend is about to go down!"

"That might not be so nya."

As they traded sword strikes and fist blows, the flashing silver shadows and the sound of body blows increased as their fight intensified.

In the other dusty battlefield, Naotsugu was in a pinch.

Under the simultaneous attacks of 8 foes, Naotsugu only had 2400 HP left. But he remained calm, parrying Brigandia's blows with his shield as he maintained his party's formation.

Remaining composed in chaotic situations was a mark of an excellent vanguard. Naotsugu's experienced movements looked doubly impressive in Serara's eyes.

"Ready the spell!"

She heard Shiroe's soft words. Serara answered a few pitches higher than normal as she listened to her racing pulse. "Right!"

"It's almost time Shiroe! 'Castle of Stone'!"

Naotsugu held the shield close with a shout, taking a wide steady stance. His shield, armor, and sword shone like ancient granite marble, giving off magic and fighting aura.

"What, what is this?" "Just a bit more, finish him off!" "Take this! Assassinate!"

One of these 8 members who seemed to be an Assassin used a hard-hitting skill on Naotsugu. The

Assassin's sword swung towards Naotsugu's armor with a sound that seemed to burn through the air; this strike was definitely a fatal blow.

But the attack ended with a loud clank, blocked by Naotsugu's shield.

Castle of Stone.

This was one of the strong defense skills available exclusively to Guardians. In its short 10 second span, this emergency skill could negate all damage. Naotsugu, who turned into a fortress of marble, used his invincible shield to protect the defense line.

"Told you so nya, Naotsugu-cchi won't fall so easily."

"Now Serara, cast all your healing spells on Naotsugu!"

Serara sprang up and took a step forward, raising her hand to the sky.

She chanted Healing Wind, a single target healing pulse spell. She was already using the party-wide spell Heartbeat Healing, and she was now stacking Healing Wind on top of that.

But Serara didn't stop with this.

After casting 2 heal over time spells, she continued to chant instant healing magic, wielding her level 19 ability to the limit and sending all the healing she had to the front line.

This was the only thing she could do as a healer.

While her allies protected her in the front, she would protect them with her healing spells from the back.

Serara remembered the voice of her guild master, the memorable sound of that Cleric.

The real advantage of healing over time spells was that as they were spells that remained in effect, you could use the spare time to cast multiple healing magics. A Druid who put everything into her healing had unimaginable potential, the instant healing ability overwhelming the other 2 healing class.

It was powerful even at level 19. Naotsugu's HP, which was now less than 20%, was recovering gradually under Serara's multiple healing spells.

"Buying time won't save you!"

On the other hand, Demiqas had gotten more furious as he attacked Nyanta.

Castle of Stone was indeed a powerful defense skill, making a Monk like Demiqas from the warrior class green with envy. But it still had a weak point.

The con to using it was the long cool down time. This invincible ultimate skill could only be used once every 10 minutes.

10 minutes was more than enough to kill these critters 20 times. If he was using a skill he couldn't use

again for another 10 minutes, it meant he was out of options to handle the attacks of the 8 members.

In the 600 seconds of the 10-minute cool down, he could only negate all physical damage for 10 seconds. From this perspective, Castle of Stone was not an ultimate skill, but a desperate move.

The time when Castle of Stone wore off meant the end of these guys. This victorious moment in the future had already flashed across Demiqas' mind.

Demiqa's fierce attacks were pushing Nyanta to the brink. Serara, who was watching her allies' conditions using the status screen, was regretting her lack of power.

The Guardian who was fighting the 8 members of Brigandia in the front and Nyanta who had been caring for her kindly all this time were both covered in wounds.

She couldn't save them even after giving her all, the MP that was supporting her healing was gradually decreasing.

"Think it's about time, Shiroe-chi nya."

"Here we go Chief Nyanta."

But ignoring Serara's desperation, Shiroe and Nyanta chatted in high spirits.

Nyanta moved like a leaf dancing in the wind to Demiqas. Although he was surprised, Demiqas still kicked upwards in a wide arc, attempting to sweep the slender man in front of him away.

But Nyanta used his raised knee as a platform to leap into the air.

Silver flashed brightly.

The rapiers in Nyanta's hand shredded the air, striking like lightning. 3, 4, 5 hits... Serara could only count so many. Nyanta's rapier split into countless copies, piercing the azure vines that had bound Demiqas without her noticing.

Swashbucklers had the fastest attacking speed out of the 12 classes, and not only was Nyanta's attack power improved through Shiroe's enhancement magic, but Nyanta also triggered the trap spell Thorn Bind Hostage on his opponent.

Nyanta's slashes.

Shiroe's Thorn Bind Hostage.

The combination attack of the two repeated 10 times in 2 seconds. Every time Nyanta struck, the spell would activate like an exploding lightning ball, giving out flashes and shock waves.

Just like a bullet imploding in the confined space of a cartridge, compression increased damage power. Demiqas looked like he was swarmed by attacks from invisible men around him, staggering from the impact and dying before he could even scream.

"No way!" "The guild master is...!"

Everyone present received a psychological blow.

A level 90 warrior supported fully by healers had died in an instant. The more experience you had in Elder Tales, the more you would fall into doubt and despair from this scene.

"Nyanta-san..."

Serara's gentle voice was also expressing this point. She couldn't catch up with the battle that had happened in front of her.

"Put away your swords!"

Naotsugu shouted, making the Brigandia members look at each other. The scream from behind them made them turn pale.

Looking towards the source, they saw their healers on the ground. The number 2 man of the guild... Londark in gray robes, was kneeling on the ground with one arm missing.

The black haired young girl who used the vacant 3 seconds to the limit, who looked like a lovely flower, was pressing her blade to Londark's neck.

Part 7

Akatsuki, who saw the same scene play out as Serara, had a rough idea what had happened.

Adventurers had great physical attributes; not only muscle strength and agility, but their dynamic vision was also better than in the real world.

Although Akatsuki had practiced Kendo since she was a child, she felt that it would be impossible to see that kind of sword speed in real life. Even now, she only caught about half of what had happened.

In fact, she was struggling to comprehend what she saw and was trying to deduce what had happened.

Akatsuki belonged to the Assassin class which had the highest attack power among the weapon-based classes. Even her strongest skill, however, was not strong enough to kill a level 90 warrior class.

Akatsuki had wiped out the healers who were supporting Demiqas, so he wasn't able to regain any of his HP.

Even taking that into account, it was still unthinkable for a player to defeat a warrior-class character that quickly.

In Elder Tales, battles were long drawn-out affairs, especially those between players. Sure-kill attacks were just a figure of speech in this world as these instances were very rare.

No matter how strong a player was, if their opponents were about the same level, it would inevitably take dozens of rounds to settle a fight. If both of them were supported by healers, the fight could drag on indefinitely without a clear victor.

The more experience you had with Elder Tales, the deeper your understanding of this fact. It became common sense.

However, Nyanta had dished out an unbelievable amount of damage.

The secret lay within the glowing azure vines. Shiroe's Thorn Bind Hostage was a trap spell unique to Enchanters; it bound an opponent with 5 vines and caused 1000 points of additional damage per vine when destroyed by an ally.

The damage was only 5000 if all the thorns were activated, which was only a third of Demiqas' HP. Even adding in the damage from Nyanta's attack, it would not have been enough to defeat Demiqas.

The many training sessions had made Akatsuki familiar with the spells Shiroe commonly used.

Since Thorn Bind Hostage was one of Shiroe's best spells, Akatsuki could identify its use by looking at the visual effects.

The cool down time for Thorn Bind Hostage was 15 seconds.

Although it was just a deduction, Nyanta had stopped his attack for fourteen seconds after Shiroe set this trap spell.

After luring Demiqas into taking the offensive and enduring his attacks for those fourteen seconds, Nyanta made sure he had a good position to strike as he calculated the time to attack.

When the time was right, Nyanta had leaped into the air and struck 5 times with the rapier in his left hand. These five hits had pierced the vines, triggering the additional damage.

At that exact moment, Shiroe, whose cool down time ended, had recast Thorn Bind Hostage on Demiqas. Nyanta, who was still in mid-air, then turned around and slashed another five times with the rapier in his right hand. [\[10\]](#)

The result: a chain attack with a total of 10 hits.

Understanding the cool down time on Shiroe's spell and chaining the two Thorn Bind Hostage spells; 10 hits activated all 10 vines.

This was the truth behind the battle that Akatsuki saw.

Akatsuki could only tell this, however, because she knew the features of this spell through her repeated practices with Shiroe.

The attack skill of the Swashbuckler in mid-air had no gaps; hitting ten times in two seconds is an unique ability to this class.

Ten strikes in two seconds; meaning one strike every 0.2 seconds. They had used the small "gap" between the fifth and sixth strike to cast the second set of Thorn Bind Hostage vines... it was almost humanly impossible.

It could be classified as an ultimate tag-team move.

If they could dish out this kind of attack, it could be possible to deplete the HP of a warrior class in an instant.

But could something like this be done so easily?

If anyone asked that question, the answer would definitely be "no".

Akatsuki, who was biting her lip unconsciously, hurriedly resumed her normal, serious expression. The battle was not over yet.

She felt the truth that was unfolding before her was in conflict with the common sense in her heart.

Even she, who had trained dozens of days with Shiroe, could not achieve this feat. Such an impressive attack came from two players who hadn't met for ages without coordinating in advance.

The mental blow to the members of Brigandia was several times more severe than it was to Akatsuki.

"... Just who are these people?"

"... Where did the power that defeated Demiqas come from?"

"... Are they over level 90?"

"... Could they be an elite team from another zone?"

The attack that had taken Akatsuki some time to grasp was almost impossible for others to understand at a glance. They couldn't even begin to comprehend it.

"When... how..."

Demiqa, who ruled the guild with an iron fist. The tactician, Londark, who had stayed in Brigandia despite his personality clashing with Demiqa...

The bandits, who lost their two leaders, still had much of their fighting strength left, but the psychological impact was strong enough to stop them from attacking.

"We came through Deep in Palm." Shiroe stated, as he walked towards Londark.

"Akiba and this city are no longer so far apart as to prevent travel between them. We have obtained the maps and the means and have reported back... You are finished causing this kind of trouble."

The truth, however, was not so optimistic.

Akatsuki's group came here with the aid of the griffons. Not all players could travel with the same speed.

If you wanted to visit the Ezzo Empire, it would still be a long and tedious journey.

However, in order to plant the feeling of defeat deeply in the bandits, Shiroe announced this as if it were fact. Akatsuki dug her blade gently into Londark's throat to emphasize Shiroe's words.

"We've won this battle. For the remaining head, let's call it a draw."

Shiroe drew a dagger from within his cloak and cut off Demiqa's head. The sword made a wet sound as it cut through bones and sinew. Akatsuki saw Shiroe's expression dim.

This was expected. Even if death was not permanent in Elder Tales, Shiroe did not want to decapitate anyone. However, he maintained his cruel tone.

There was no telling how great a deterrent decapitation was in this world without death, but Akatsuki felt this was the price that Brigandia must pay for their crimes. Since the members of Brigandia were using their lives as chips in this bet, it was only normal to forfeit that which they bet if they lost.

Shiroe's cruel demeanor and his wicked gaze made the Brigandia members back away slowly.

The scream of a griffon tore through the icy silence.

The three griffons that came from the western skies assumed a triangle formation, landing violently before Shiroe's team.

"Serara-san, come here~nya!"

Nyanta, who already sheathed his rapiers, extended his hand to Serara and guided her over to his griffon. He picked her up, cradling her in his arms and jumped onto the griffon.

Naotsugu motioned for the others to mount their griffons as he took a step forward to protect Akatsuki.

Akatsuki swung her blade to clear away the blood while Shiroe stood in front of her. As usual, Shiroe looked at her with unapproachable but caring eyes.

"Let's go Akatsuki!"

That's why Akatsuki nodded in response.

Like always, her response conferred gratitude and respect that she didn't need to express in words.

"Time to take off! We are getting out of here, escape festival!"

Naotsugu yelled the phrase used by cavalry strike forces as he took to the sky. The light-brown griffon Nyanta mounted took off soon after with a mighty leap.

Akatsuki brushed aside Shiroe's hand lightly and jumped onto the griffon. She could leap onto the griffon with the strengthened body of an Adventurer without needing Shiroe's help.

This was Shiroe's mount, however, so it would be rude to jump on without saying anything; but it would be too formal to seek permission, so Akatsuki used Shiroe's fingertips as a guide and leapt up behind him.

Shiroe stared down the Brigandia members till the very end. He gave up on them with a sigh and turned to Akatsuki and said:

"Let's go."

Akatsuki acknowledged this with a nod. Shiroe signaled the griffon with his heels and the griffon climbed up an invisible staircase in the wind under the gaze of the Brigandia members and Adventurers outside Susukino.

And thus, the 3 majestic creatures left whirlwinds behind and took to the sky.

The pain Akatsuki felt in witnessing Shiroe and Nyanta's combo attack as well as the frustration she sensed in the city-zone of Susukino were shred to pieces by the wind that blew over the griffon.

The quest to save the Crescent Moon Alliance member, the young girl Serara, had been completed perfectly.

Although it would be another week before they reached Akiba, this was still an amazing result.

The howling wind was unable to disrupt Akatsuki's peaceful state of mind. She was quiet and satisfied at the completion of a mission and grabbed at Shiroe's back gently.

"My lord."

"What is it Akatsuki?"

"Nothing."

"I see... let's go home, to Akiba."

"Yeah."

Leaving the words that would be carried off by the wind once they were uttered, the blue skies tore the scenery surrounding Akatsuki to pieces.

The 3 griffons were like larks that had escaped from the cage binding them, spreading their wings and flying to the southern skies.

"ELDER TALE" CLASS CHART

► MAIN CLASSES

WARRIOR CLASSES		WEAPON ATTACK CLASSES		HEALING CLASSES		MAGIC ATTACK CLASSES	
	GUARDIAN WIELDS THE HIGHEST DEFENSIVE ABILITY AND ABILITIES THAT GATHERS ENEMIES BY AGGRO.		ASSASSIN A PURE ATTACKER PROFICIENT IN THE USE OF DIVERSE WEAPONS.		CLERIC THE ULTIMATE HEALER BOASTING OF THE GREATEST HEALING ABILITY.		SORCERER STRONG AT DEALING DIRECT DAMAGE TO OPPONENTS.
	SAMURAI USES JAPANESE-STYLED EQUIPMENT, AND WIELDS POWERFUL SKILLS.		SWASHBUCKLER TAKES UP A GUERRILLA-LIKE POSITION, DUEL-WIELDING AND VERSATILE.		DRUID A MAGIC-TYPE HEALING CLASS THAT ALLIES WITH THE NATURAL AND SPIRITS		SUMMONER STRONG AT SUMMONING AND MANIPULATING MYTHICAL BEASTS AND SPIRITS.
	MONK A BALANCE CLASS THAT LACKS ARMAMENTS BUT EXCELS IN EVASION.		BARD A LIGHT-ARMORED WARRIOR FLUENT IN MANY "SONGS" OF MAGICAL EFFECTS.		KANNAGI A PREVENTIVE-TYPE HEALING CLASS THAT BLOCKS OFF DAMAGE.		ENCHANTER STRONG AT THE CONTROL OF BATTLE STATUS AND MP.

► SUB CLASSES ※THE LIST IS FAR FROM COMPREHENSIVE

PRODUCTION	ROLE-PLAYING					TITLES & MISC
BLACKSMITH	ACCOUNTANT	SIGILMANCER		BUTLER	WAR PRIEST	SWORD SAINT
TAILOR	MERCHANT	FORTUNE TELLER		FARMER	COURIER	DRAGON SLAYER
ARTISAN	VAMPIRE	CARPENTER		FISHERMAN	ROSE GARDEN PRINCESS	
PHARMACIST	TRACKER	ANIMAL TRAINER		DAIRY FARMER	HARVESTER	
CHEF	CLEANER	SWORDSMITH		PHYSICIAN	ASSISTANT	
WOODCRAFTER	HOUSEKEEPER	HUNTER		HERBALIST		
SCRIBE	BERSERKER	FEUDAL LORD		COURTESAN		
MECHANIC	BORDER PATROL	ARISTOCRAT		HITMAN		
ALCHEMIST	APPRENTICE	KNIGHT		UNDEAD HUNTER		
BREWER	ADVERTISER	SCHOLAR		DANCER		

Afterword

Greetings readers, this is the first time we met!

To the readers online, I am happy to see you again!

I am Mamare Touno.

Thank you for buying Log Horizon 1: The beginning of a different world. This book is the edited version of the April 2010 web series, with some changes made in its settings. The quality and legibility of the novel has also been improved, I hope it will be one of your treasured books.

Leaving such dull forewords aside, let's talk about Mamare (younger sister). As the rumor mill says, Mamare has a sister so frail and weak it is troubling.

Although Mamare is the same, but Mamare(younger sister) is not very bright.

A long time ago when we were young.

When I told her the eggs inside a capelin fish is inserted through its butt with a syringe, she totally believed me. When Mamare described how 'Capelin technicians works hard inserting eggs in a freezing factory', Mamare (younger sister) nodded repeatedly with a serious expression. I can still remember her face back then.

A few days ago, she forgot the Capelin injection theory came from me and told me about it.

Although that is general knowledge, but it is a fake knowledge.

I didn't point it out, but took it in with a impressed expression. But she found out the truth from others and threw a tantrum at me.

Mamare (younger sister) takes another step up the stairs of adulthood. But the stairs she is climbing up is an escalator going downwards, so it is unable to tell if she is progressing or it is just the background that is moving.

To be certain, I searched for the Capelin injection theory online. Instead of being an urban legend, it is more akin to something that is really happening. Seems like the nonsense Mamare came up with did not interfere with reality.

Sometime after this episode, I informed Mamare (younger sister) 'Male Capelin will also be injected with eggs and sold in the market'. She hides in her blankets and ignores me, unwilling to believe me about this stuff. It takes a long time to build up trust, but only an instant to lose it. But I think the sister I have been lying to for over 10 years is also an idiot.

But both Mamare and Mamare (younger sister) have bad memory retention. All she can think about a

while later is dinner, totally forgetting this incident.

The Mamare siblings are just like this, sharing close relations like England and Ireland. When I told her 'The Log Horizon I told you about is going to be published okay?', she didn't believe me at all. Her reactions is 'Stop lying stupid brother'.

This is expected. Because Mamare is also doubtful about publishing this book. As for Mamare (younger sister) who treats all her brother's words as lies, leaving her alone is also a kind of entertainment, so I didn't explain in depth.

And after going through all this, Log Horizon is delivered to all the readers right now.

The characters who are more lively than the web novel version will lead the story in the next episode.

The status screen of each character at the beginning of chapters is the best sign. The equipment they have is amazingly, picked from the 2011 January fan submission.

Out of the almost 300 submission, the ones we used belong to IGM_masamune, LAN, akinon29, ebius1, gontan_, izumino, kane_yon, oddmake, roki_a, sawame_ja, vaiso, thank you all netizens for your ideas, thank you everyone! Although we can't publish due to lack of pages, I am still grateful to all fans who participated, Shiroe's gang are happy too.

Log Horizon started out as a web novel, so we will be continuing with this project starting from the next volume. You can get the latest news from <http://mamare.net>, which contains other works by Mamare apart from Log Horizon.

Next is my concluding words of gratitude. I am grateful to chief publisher Mr Shoji Masuda, the illustration master Harakazuro sensei who draws amazingly, tsubakiya firm for the publishing designs, Mr Osako who helped straighten out my writing and my editor F-ta san! Thank you everyone!

If the readers are entertained by the adventures of Shiroe and friends, the book is officially done. Please take your time to enjoy.

'The one who loves Capelin the most' Mamare Touno

▶ログ・ホライズン

① 異世界のはじまり

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ゲームデザイナーとして『リンダキューブ』、『俺の屍を越えてゆけ』などを制作。小説家としても活躍し、『鬼切り夜鳥子』シリーズや『ハルカ』シリーズ、『ジョン & マリー ふたりは賞金稼ぎ』、『傷だらけのビーナ』などを発表。最新作は児童書に初挑戦した『透明の猫と年上の妹』。そのほかの著書に『ゲームデザイン脳 榎田省治の発想とワザ』がある。

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LOG HORIZON

シロエは語る!!



僕がギルドに誘うのを待っていてくれたのか

一番高いハードルはその先、それは……なんとというか、みんなの善意と、希望です。

ピンチだからこそ、

2011年5月31日発売!!

アキバの街から退場してもらいます



ログ・ホライズンは読者とともに生きていきます! 詳しくは <http://mamare.net/>

異世界を甘く見すぎてます
必死さが、足りないです

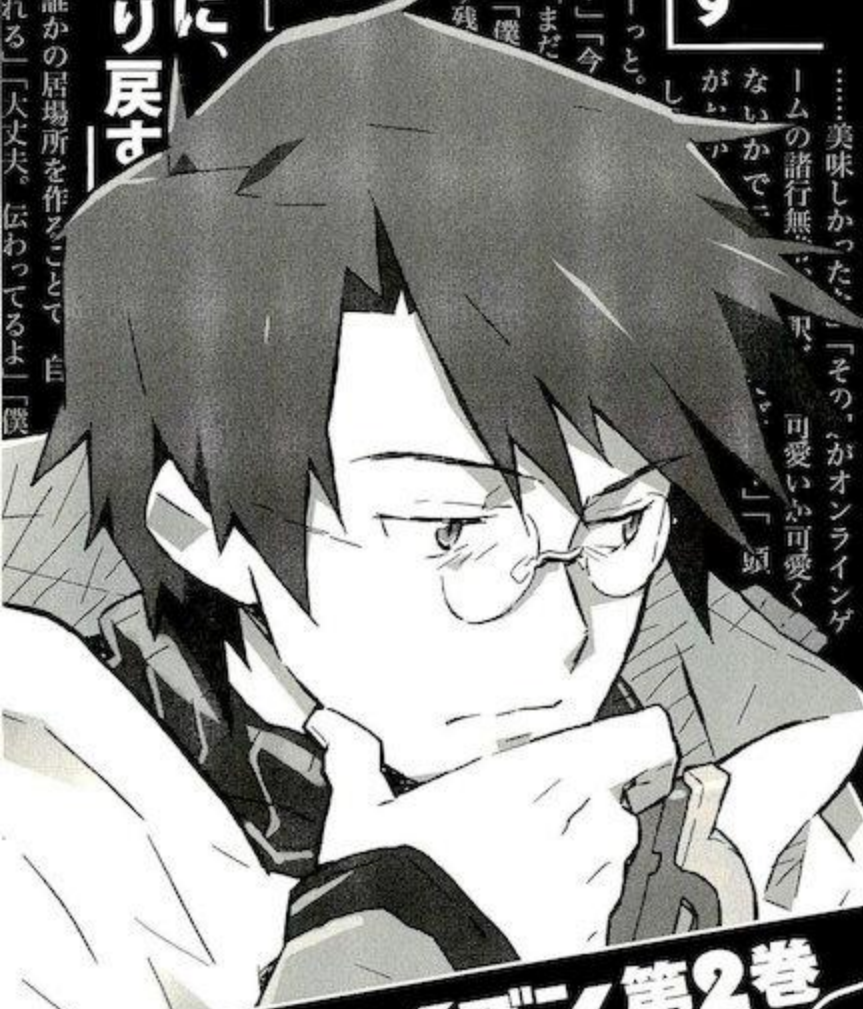
カレーなの?
今日カレーなのか!?
僕はカレーが大好きだ

世の男子一般と同じくらいしか。パンツに興味ないよっ

資金が必要なんです

僕が格好悪い
下手したら
一番格好悪い

この世界に、
活気を取り戻す



ログ・ホライズン 第2巻
キヤメロットの騎士
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表面的な穏やかさは取り戻したものの、一方ですさんだ空気をまとい続けるアキバ。教え子たる双子の拘留に、アキバへの嫌悪感をぬぐいきれなくなったシロエは……。